

EDGE 25TH ANNIVERSARY


25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
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THE FUT
E ENTERTAINMENT
#323
OCTOBER 2018



They're smoking cigars, he got a chain full of flowers

Birthdays, as our crinklier readers will understand all too well, feel less like something worth celebrating the older you get. Collating the **Edge** Annual 93, a compendium of work from our first year that we're giving away for free on iOS, made us feel positively ancient. Yet it's with no little pride that we sat down late last year and began sketching out our plans for **Edge**'s 25th anniversary. Our thanks to you for joining the party.

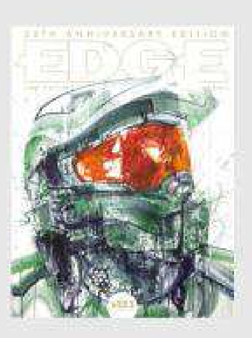
Longevity is a precious commodity in videogames, but one man who's been a constant industry presence throughout our time on shelves is Toshihiro Nagoshi. In the beginning, he was Sega's arcade innovator; these days he's its chief creative officer. Oh, and most importantly, he wrote an **Edge** column for several years. In Collected Works, he looks back on a remarkable career. In Game Changers, meanwhile, we celebrate ten games that have defined **Edge**'s lifetime, setting new standards for the wider industry to follow.

So, yes, we're still here – and for this milestone, we thought we'd do something a little different. UK artist Dave White has been a friend of the show for years and a reader for even longer, and has graciously agreed to lend us his brushes. His interpretations of characters from four of his favourite games grace our split-run cover this month – and if you've nabbed Knight Solaire, then lucky you. Only 100 copies were produced worldwide, and were signed by White as they rolled off the printer.

If you missed out, all is not lost. A limited-edition box set (see p17) will ensure collectors get the full complement of anniversary covers. And there's more. On the opposite page you'll find a quote from a game, written in code (there's one per cover game, taken from the series in question). Hidden throughout each of the four editions of the print magazine, our digital editions and a few other places, you'll find the key. We suggest you work together – but only to a point. The first person to email us (edge@futurenet.com, subject line '**Edge** 25') with all four quotes, who said them and in which specific game, wins the original Solaire painting. The next ten get a box set. Good luck, and here's to another quarter-century in the most dynamic form of entertainment on the planet.









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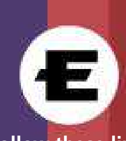
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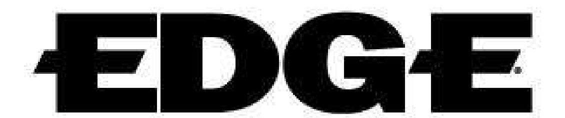
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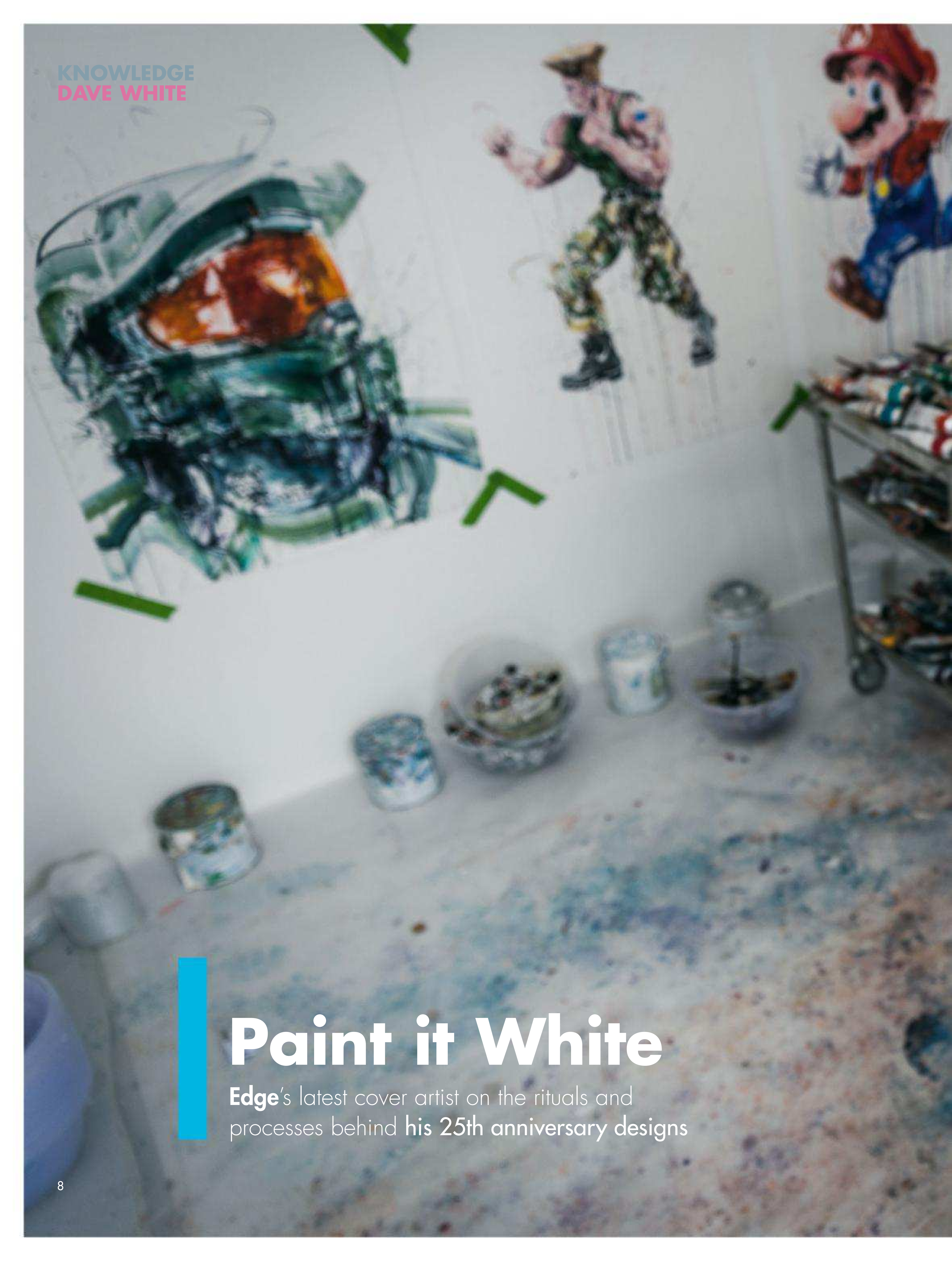
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Paint it White

Edge's latest cover artist on the rituals and processes behind **his 25th anniversary designs**

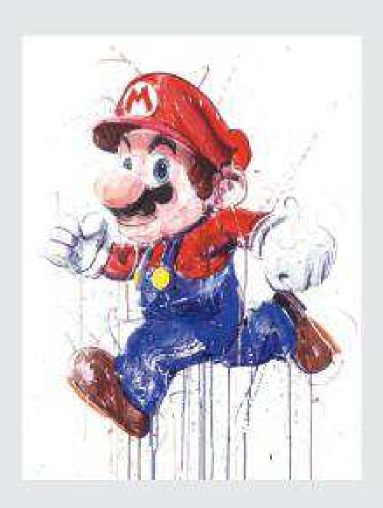


Dave White in his studio: "Some of the people I admire most in the world are happy to literally spend five years on a painting. I'm the polar opposite of that"

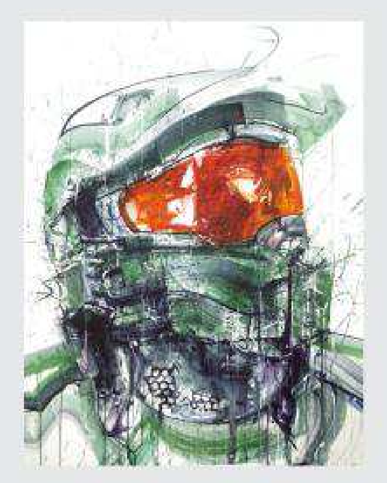
Videogames have been a big part of artist **Dave White**'s life since *Space Invaders*. Though, as we noted in **E**317's My Favourite Game, he's rarely combined his hobby with his work. Yet he didn't have to think twice when invited to paint four covers to commemorate **Edge**'s 25th anniversary. In fact, **Edge** is tied to one of White's happiest memories: his first professional exhibition at Connaught Brown gallery in London, where the young artist was surprised and delighted to find his work hanging next to pieces from the likes of Picasso and Hockney. "I was only 22, and I was reading **Edge** on the way down," he tells us. "I think it was issue two or three, and it was all about the Neo Geo CD. In the Trocadero I played *Samurai Shodown II*, and then I sold my work in this show for something like £1,000. A thousand pounds for me then was like a Ferrari. So what did I do? I went out and bought a Japanese Neo Geo CD!"

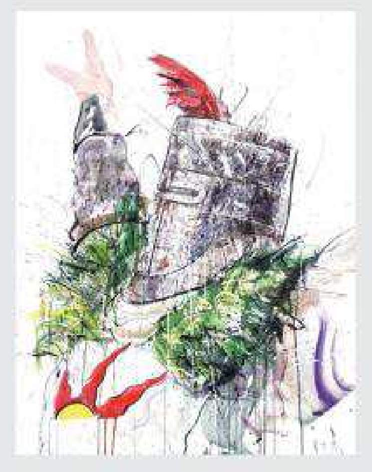
That's hardly White's biggest splurge on fighting games, either. He has a *Super Street Fighter II X* cabinet in his studio, which, as a creature of habit, he's worked into his daily routine. "I've always been a very disciplined person," he says. "I'm in here for 8 o'clock, then it takes me a couple of hours to mix all the paint I need. I'll put my Sonos on with my playlist for the day, I'll have a game of *Street Fighter* and then I'll start painting."

That time spent preparing is essential for his process, he says, allowing him to stay in the moment as he works. Once he starts, he doesn't really stop, entering a kind of flow state that's akin to the feeling you get from a favourite videogame; indeed, just as we're about to make the comparison he immediately likens it to playing *Destiny*. "Or like driving a car," he adds. "It's almost like autopilot. When you know what you're getting into and your brain just starts subconsciously working. I don't even think about it. Painting for me is like a meditative thing.









White never looks at his work once it's finished, so seeing it again is a strange experience for him. "Every single mark I make is just like a millisecond," he says

And I only know when a painting is coming towards the end is when my brain is like, 'Well, why don't you put a bit of this here, or a bit of that there'." That, he says, is when he knows he's done; he'll take the painting off his easel and turn it to face the wall, keen not to overthink it, and lose the spontaneity that makes his work so distinctive.

> "Edge perfectly encapsulates a hobby that I love – there's a real distinctive wit and flavour to it"

As such, like the rest of his work, each of White's **Edge** covers was completed in a single sitting. His preferred medium is oil on canvas, but the past decade has seen him experiment more with watercolours, which he used to paint the four anniversary covers. "In a weird way, it's almost like the polar opposite of oil," he says. "But it's interesting because now I'm making the oil paint move like watercolour and making watercolours – in certain places – move like oil."

ART OF FIGHTING

White's love of games and his work have rarely intertwined before, though he admits his thoughts do drift toward games while he paints. "More often than not I'm probably thinking about a level I'm stuck on, or a combo I want to master." And when he talks about the danger of overthinking his work, he likens it to a never-ending game of *Tetris*: "You could be at it for the rest of your days." Given his penchant for fighting games, it's no surprise that his favourite artists are Japanese: he's a fan of the Udon art collective and Shinkiro, best known for his work at SNK in the 1990s. His affection for Bengus, one of Capcom's most influential artists, is especially fitting – since he also routinely completed his illustrations in one sitting.

White's use of white backgrounds gives him no place to hide: each stroke of the brush he puts down remains to the end. "There's no room for making a mess," he says. "But I love that." It's no surprise, then, to learn that he's a big fan of *Dark Souls*, a game where there's similarly little margin for error. But how best to represent the series? For a while he mulled over the idea of painting one of its bosses. "I thought about doing Sif, because I was stuck on that bastard for so long!" he laughs. "I don't know why. It took me about two weeks. But then I thought, 'Nah, it's got to be Solaire.'" And so he set to work on recreating Miyazaki's genial knight, assuming his most famous pose. If *Street Fighter* was an inevitable pick, meanwhile, he wanted to paint a character that wasn't the most obvious choice. "I had to go with Guile because he's who I play in *Street Fighter* and always have done," he says.

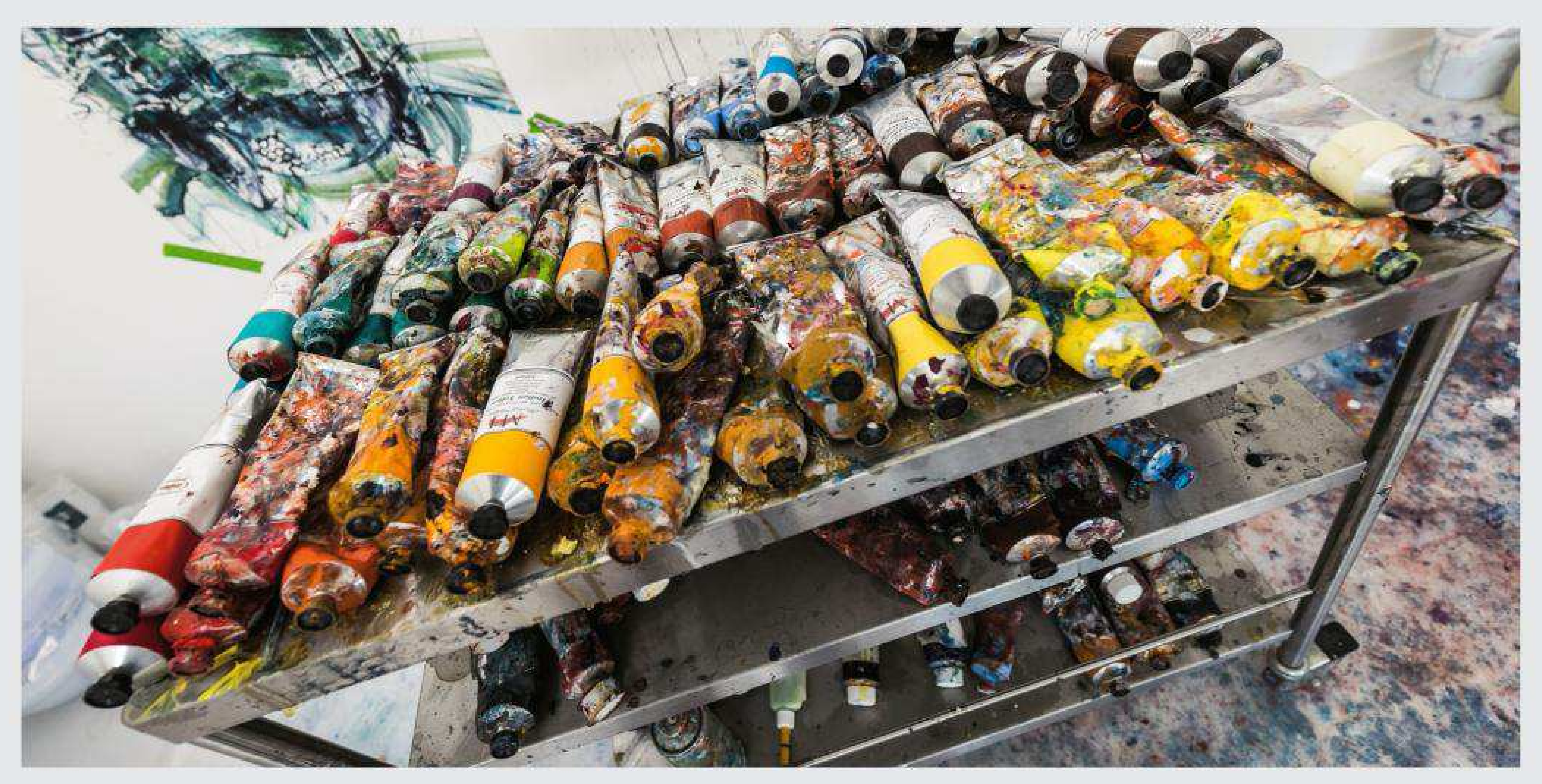
Evidently fond of setting himself a challenge, White suggests the Master Chief cover was the toughest of the four – especially since, in recent times, he's turned his focus to the natural world. "He's such an iconic figure. If you look at my animal works in particular, they're very organic. When you're painting something inorganic like a man-made helmet, it's very, very different. But it was really good fun to do." His fourth and final pick, meanwhile, warrants no further elaboration. *Super Mario*? "Well, obviously."

"It's been incredibly rewarding," White says – and it's clear that **Edge** means something more to him than the magazine that convinced him to spend the proceeds of his first big sale on expensive import hardware. "There's something about the aesthetic of holding something: I guess it's like vinyl records as opposed to a digital MP3," he says. "**Edge** perfectly encapsulates a hobby that I love – there's a real distinctive wit and flavour to it. So this has been a massive honour for me. There are certain projects you do in your life which are real bucket-list things. When I was asked, there wasn't even a hesitation in my mind." ■

Since White works almost on instinct, it's vital he has everything he needs before he starts work. "I mix a lot of things in with the paint – it's like chemistry, in a way"













Business and pleasure

Project director Tim Endres on the careful balancing act that powers Gamescom

This year marks Gamescom's tenth anniversary. In Cologne's Koelnmesse, the conference brings together industry professionals and gaming enthusiasts from all over the world. It continues to grow: 100,000 square metres in 2009 more than doubled to 210,000 in 2017. The exhibitor count is now nearly 1,000, and last year 355,000 visitors attended the show. A decade of successful business and community building is no mean feat, considering some publishers are now moving away from trade shows to put on separate events. But Gamescom's magic is in its melting pot. Here, project director **Tim Endres** explains how to create a space that represents everyone – and that is, by extension, something all the big players will still want a slice of for years to come.

How did you come up with the concept for Gamescom? What niche did you feel it could fill?
It was a result of the discussions we had with our partners. We stay in close contact with the German Game Industry Association. All the major players are organised in this association, and that's good feedback for us. We recognised from the beginning that the trade on the one side, but also the consumer, the media and tech on the other side, are both very relevant for the concept of Gamescom. In 2009, we already had a business area and an entertainment area – separated expos, but within walking distance, and that's the success story.

E3 has had trouble making it work in recent years. What's your secret to doing it successfully?
The biggest reason is the different platforms for different target groups. We have a full week of gaming at Gamescom. It's not only the business area, and entertainment area, and the fairground – the Gamescom week starts on Sunday with Devcom, the international developer conference. We also have SPOBIS Gaming and Media, which we launched last year: it's a B2B congress which focuses on esports and marketing. Then there's the Gamescom City Festival in the city centre with music, entertainment, good food and fun, all free of charge. And this is what Gamescom is about: it's a 360-degree event for all the industry.

"The gaming industry is developing very fast, and it's hard to say how it looks in *five* years"

What's the business reason for attracting families to the show?
Our aim is to have the whole gaming community at Gamescom. For example, mobile gaming is more family entertainment, and there are maybe more older target groups there than in triple-A gaming. One of Gamescom's strengths was always to have all types of gaming on all platforms – mobile, PC, console – because we want to show the whole market for the whole community. Family is one big part of that.

Some triple-A publishers are distancing themselves from shows such as E3. How do you retain their interest in Gamescom, and keep everyone under one roof?
There are individual side events in the context of Gamescom every year: however, there is no recognisable tendency [for publishers to run their own events] at Gamescom. The core of the gaming event remains Gamescom on the fairground, for sure, and the reason for this is the advisory board. All the major players are members, we have constant contact, we hear about their needs, and we put those needs in the concept.



Project director Tim Endres

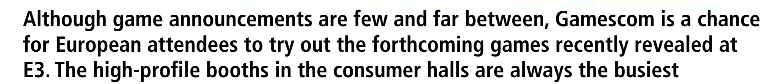
And what are their needs? What's the reason they keep coming to Gamescom?
It is the size of Gamescom, because it's a massive crowd of consumers they can address on the fairground – but also being able to stream events on their own, or on our Gamescom website via our new platform, Gamescom Live. It's additional reach for the exhibitors, but the crowd here on the fairground is very important for them. But this *only* works together with the business area, which is the European hub for the international gaming industry. Everyone who wants to do business at Gamescom needs to be in the business area, because the number of international exhibitors increases year-on-year. This combination is really the success story, and what the exhibitors are looking for.

How do you ensure that Gamescom is still relevant in, say, the next ten years?
Well, the next ten years is a long time! [laughs] The gaming industry is developing very fast, and it's hard to say how it looks in *five* years. We always need to be fast to get new trends, and this is what will be the priority for the next decade: finding trends, offering the right platforms for new and different target groups, and designing Gamescom better every year.

What about the next two or three years? Do you have an inkling as to what's going to be the next big trend?
Streaming will be very important. The other thing is esports, which is one of our main strategic fields. We already have ideas for how we can develop it – they're not ready to announce, but we have many ideas. ■

The Gamescom City Festival attracts music lovers from all over Cologne. The concerts take place across multiple stages, and are free to attend




Although game announcements are few and far between, Gamescom is a chance for European attendees to try out the forthcoming games recently revealed at E3. The high-profile booths in the consumer halls are always the busiest







TREND ZONE

From social media to stunt stars, Gamescom delivers



This year's Gamescom, taking place from 21st to 25th August, will feature laser tag, an outdoor Red Bull Action Area and even a man-made beach to play volleyball on. "We have various communities we target: for example cosplayers, or esports," Tim Endres says. "We have specific concepts for them, like the Cosplay Village we developed in 2011. And we will do this in the coming years with different communities." Facebook is an exhibitor for the first time ever this year, taking up plenty of floor space with its booth – as will the merch area. "Years ago, we had three merchandise booths," Endres says. "Now we have a whole hall."

MATERIAL GIRL

Nomada Studio's bittersweet platformer is draped in the tangible and familiar

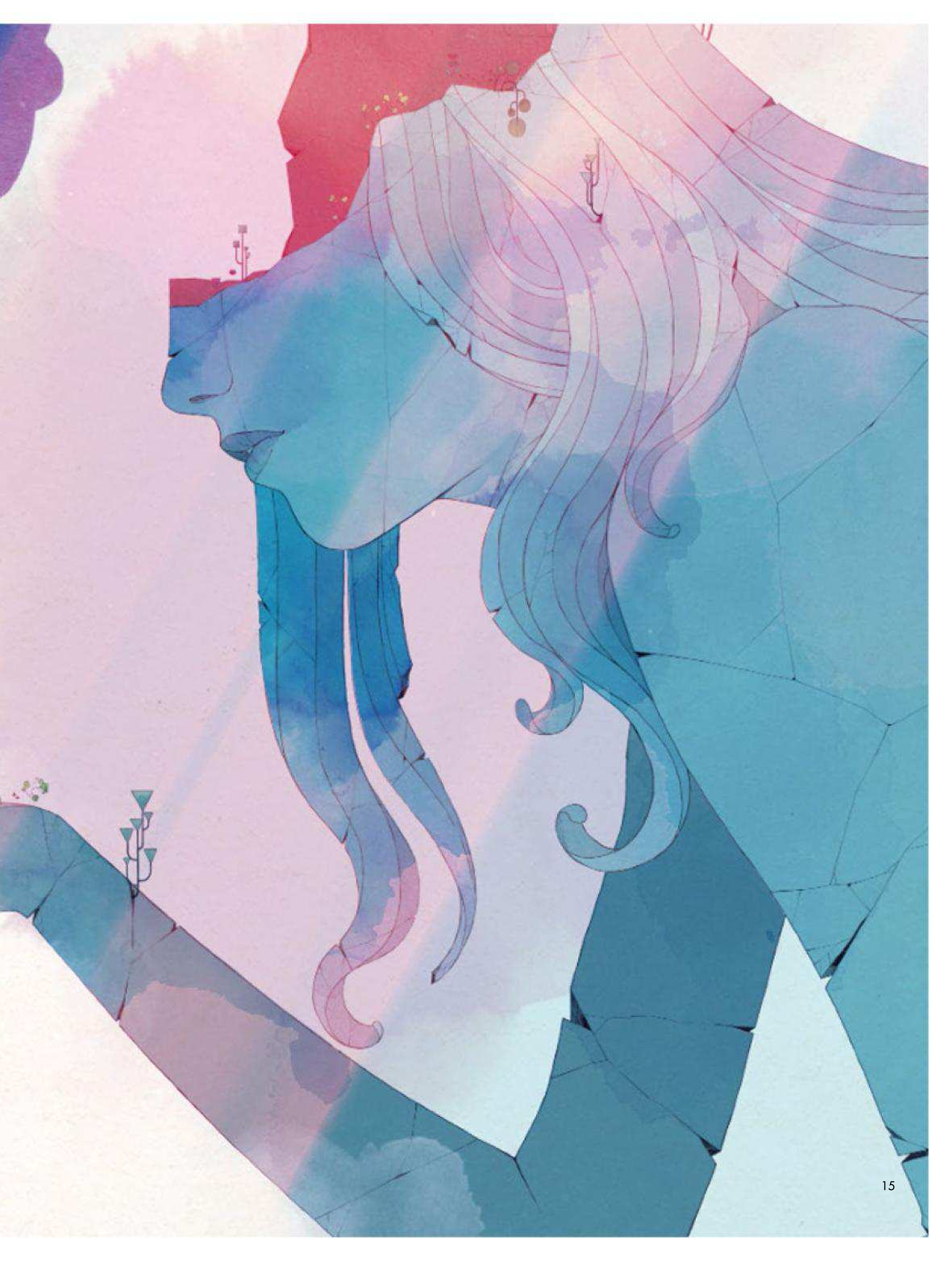
Like a scrapbook found in the attic, the dust gently blown away, the soft, swirling shapes of *Gris* evoke faded memories. It feels handmade from familiar things: sculpture, painting and the mobiles of 1930s artist Alexander Calder influenced this 2D platformer's playful, yet wistful aesthetic. "We try to give the player a clean experience without UI elements," co-founder **Roger Mendoza** says. "We use traditional techniques, like watercolours or pencil drawing, that are familiar to everyone, so they are easier to understand."

The dress the protagonist wears indicates progression throughout the game, reshaping itself as she grows. "*Gris* shows the journey of someone going through a painful time," co-founder **Adrian Cuevas** says. "We use abstract symbols so each player can relate it with their own experiences." Prepare for much more than puzzles when *Gris* comes to PC and Switch in December. ■





Nomada wants *Gris* to be accessible. Mendoza: "That doesn't mean there are no challenges, but we balance them out so the most difficult ones are optional"



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Trust me, **we have feet of clay**. We know we have tons of work to do. We mess up like anybody else."

Xbox makes mistakes, ID@Xbox chief **Chris Charla**? No!



"I was dealing with the Met, Scotland Yard, stuff like that. It was serious and it was real. I'd say, personally, **I wasn't a fan**."

Sean Murray downplays his *No Man's Sky* death threats in the most British (ok, Irish) way imaginable



"Ken [Kutaragi] didn't see the need to **involve game developers** in the design of the system. That's how the PS3 was made, and you know how successful it was."

Shuhei Yoshida, at his **Edge**-helmed Develop keynote. You should have heard the stuff he told us off the record

"As a consumer do you really care who is the publisher of X, Y and Z in your game or music collection? No. **You care about the artist**."

CEO **Debbie Bestwick** on the approach that has turned Team17 into a £200 million publisher

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Over in Japan, the barcade scene is in trouble. A swathe of venues have been closed down, or have dropped shutters voluntarily, after rights holders invoked long-standing licensing laws that prevent games being used for commercial purposes. Whether that will come west is unclear, but if it does, enter Arcade1up.

This US start-up is launching a series of three-quarter-scale arcade cabinets that are aimed primarily at the home but, thanks to being officially licensed, could help barcade owners skirt the copyright lawyers too. Until now, having proper arcade hardware in your house has been a pain: cabinets are hard to find, transport and maintain. The company's five-strong launch lineup each retail for a reasonable $399, contain a 17" LCD screen, and can be assembled from replaceable parts in minutes using only a screwdriver.

Each of the five has a slightly different control scheme, tailored to the included games. A six-button set-up designed for fighting games offers *Street Fighter II: Champion Edition*, *Super SFII* and *Super SFII Turbo*, while a two-button variant contains *Final Fight*, *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, *1944* and *Strider*. All cabinets are outfitted for multiplayer, and come with reproductions of the original cabinet artwork.

While the reduced size naturally suits seated play – and Arcade1up sells a bench seat separately – the company also offers a riser stand to bring the cabinet up to its original height. Smart stuff, all told, and while a handful of retro games for the cost of a modern console might seem a tough sell, we're already marking out the space for one in the **Edge** game room.




EDGE 25TH ANNIVERSARY

My Favourite Game Jesper Kyd

The award-winning composer on Commodore 64, Commando and creating moods

Jesper Kyd has been scoring videogames since the 1990s, emerging from the demoscene to become one of the industry's leading composers. Born in Denmark but based in Los Angeles, he's returning home in August with Copenhagen's Gaming In Symphony concerts, where the Danish National Symphony Orchestra will perform music Kyd has created for *Hitman II: Silent Assassin*, *Assassin's Creed II*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* and more.

Which came first for you: music, or games?
Wherever I went with my family, there were always pianos around, I don't know why. When things got a bit boring, I would always sit down and try to figure this instrument out. I didn't really have much interest in learning how to perform on it, it was more like, 'How does composing work?' Then I got a Commodore 64, and that's when things really opened up. I could take all I'd been teaching myself on the piano, and start creating full songs with the Commodore 64. I was 13 or 14, and that's when my interest in music exploded and I got the urge to make a piece of music every day. And so by the time I became a professional when I was 19, I was already used to creating music. I didn't play videogames before the Commodore 64, so my interest in both naturally happened at the same time.

Which games did you play back then?
Oh, I remember things like *Commando* – great soundtrack, right? – and *Parallax*. *Mercenary* was fun. *Delta*, *Sanxion*, *Uridium*, *Zoids*… I played a ton of games with great music.

MANHATTAN TRANSFER
In the mid-'90s, Kyd co-founded Danish development studio Zyrinx; after its publisher folded, his colleagues returned to Denmark and set up Io Interactive. Kyd decided to stay in New York to become a freelance composer. Was he tempted to join his friends at Io? "I thought about it, though it really didn't require that much thought," he says. "Obviously they asked me to come with them, and be part of their new venture. I asked myself: am I going to want to do music for a game maybe every two years? Now I get to do three, four, five scores a year. And that was not going to happen at Io. So I took a huge risk and decided to go for it, and I'm so glad I did, because I'm happier just creating music all the time."



After that, you were involved in the Amiga demoscene, right?
So I actually got my feet wet in that scene on the Commodore 64, but it was on the Amiga that it really took off. My friend Mikael and I were in a demogroup called The Silents Denmark. We met a bunch of programmers called Crionics and we got together and started doing demos, and soon after we founded Zyrinx, which was our game company, and started creating videogames. It was a natural progression.

Ideally, do you like to play games you're composing for to get a feel for them?
It does help me. Sometimes you see the game and it's so early that you're just looking at a bunch of polygons with no texture and trying to imagine how it's eventually going to look. I find concept art really interesting, because that's what the graphic artists look at as far as how they want the game to look and feel. Looking at that gives you more of a sense of where the game is heading.

> "I was 13 or 14 when my interest in music exploded and I got the urge to make a piece of music every day"

Do you get the opportunity to play the finished games, and do you find that instructive?
Absolutely. I like to see how it all ended up coming together, because what I've been playing and seeing is bits and pieces of things that might not be put into the full version, and also the polish is often missing when you're sitting down with these early demos. So it's a great pleasure to play the final game, and I'm always taking mental notes about it.

Which of your scores is the one fans talk to you about the most?
Assassin's Creed II is the one I keep hearing about. It was also one of the most fun and challenging projects to work on. Some of the tech demos they were showing me were all about 'creating romantic moods in Venice' and I was like, 'Wow!' I had never heard of any game trying to do something like this. It was apparent from the beginning that this score was going to be very atmospheric. That's probably my favourite music to write.

So what's your favourite game of all time?
That would be *Subnautica*. I played it in Early Access on Steam a couple of years ago, and they recently released [the finished game], and so now I'm playing through it again. It's just an incredible game, what can I say? I love open world games, and the fact that this game takes place underwater… I've never played a game like this before. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* was another one that caught my attention. *Grand Theft Auto III* was the first in 3D, but with *Vice City* they really nailed the whole thing. It was a great experience to roam this world with all the '80s music playing – very Miami Vice, and very cool. ■



"It's important to not let huge production budgets or orchestral performances take away from the core of what music really needs to be," Kyd says, "which is creative and mysterious"

BOOK
Sega Arcade: Pop-Up History
bit.ly/popupsega
Read-Only Memory continues its streak of high-quality videogame history books. Lift the cover, and Yu Suzuki's most iconic arcade cabinets blossom from within the centrefold, neatly arranging themselves into 3D paper form. From the gaudy graphics splashed across the *Space Harrier* cab, to the industrial lines of *Thunder Blade*'s skeletal chopper and the self-contained loop of *After Burner*, every model is exquisitely recreated and accompanied by original schematics, game artwork and historical context. Funded via Kickstarter, the backer edition features an exclusive silver foil case with the sleek form of *Hang-On*'s arcade bike deep-embossed into it; for those who missed out, the book will be available for online purchase later, although it will feature a printed cover design.





VIDEO
Uncharted Live Action Fan Film
bit.ly/unchartedfillion
Given that Nolan North played Cayde-6 in the *Destiny* gunslinger's final appearance, it's only fitting to see Nathan Fillion playing Nathan Drake. The roguish Firefly star is a natural in the lead role of Alan Ungan's Uncharted fan film, cracking wise and "Oh, crap"–ing with the best of them on a hectic treasure hunt. Things start slow, but soon ramp up – a shot of Fillion hurling himself through plate glass when opening the window would have adequately sufficed is peak *Uncharted* – culminating in an impeccably framed thirdperson-shooter sequence.

WEB GAME
Footsies
bit.ly/footsiesgame
HiFight is best known for collating fighting game community match highlights via Twitter. Now, it's set to contribute to the scene in a different way with its latest creation. Available on PC and Android, minimalist 2D brawler *Footsies* allows players to easily practise fighting game fundamentals. There's the ability to move forward and back, and a single attack button for a crouching forward kick. Play is based around taking advantage of your human or CPU opponent's missed attacks, chaining light blows into a more powerful special attack, and learning correct spacing. Based on animations and mechanics from *Street Fighter III*, it's reminiscent of *Divekick*'s best and purest days – we expect to see it kicking around between tournament matches for some time.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

CONSOLE
Neo Geo Mini
bit.ly/minineogeo
The latest in a long line of collectible micro consoles, SNK's Neo Geo Mini goes a step further, housing 40 classic games in a dinky replica of the '90s arcade cabinet. Already sold out in Japan, the western release will see a host of fighting games swapped out for more action-focused titles. It's unlikely you'll end up playing hours of *Metal Slug*, *King Of Fighters* and *Ninja Commando* on its 3.5-inch screen and tiny buttons – but you can plug it into a TV via HDMI, and it supports (separately sold) controllers. With Neo Geo games already available on Steam and Switch, however, shelling out for this collectible isn't exactly a must. We want one anyway.



continue

Bang on
Namco confirms *Taiko No Tatsujin* will see an EU Switch release

Shot down
Using slurs in *Rainbow Six: Siege* now gets you insta-banned

Next generation
No Man's Sky update brings full multiplayer and thirdperson mode

The beautiful game
A *Fortnite* emote in the World Cup final? Global domination achieved

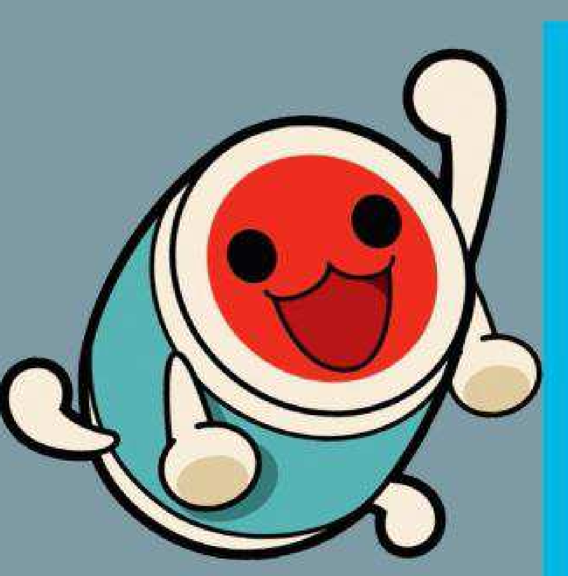
quit

Bland recognition
Funko Pop editions make *Fortnite* characters look even less interesting

Dead letter
One small typo was enough to destroy *Aliens: Colonial Marines*' AI

Spine Tingling
A Nintendo-made horror game starring Tingle once existed. If only

Race is run
Onrush dev Evo suffers layoffs after poor sales. Whose fault's that?





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DISPATCHES OCTOBER



Issue 322

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



Crosseyed and painless

I deliver a lecture as part of a public health module each year on the relationship between violence and videogames. One of the exercises I give the students involves splitting the group in half, giving one half *Flappy Bird* to play, the other survival horror *Dead Trigger 2*, and then seeing which group subsequently feels het up enough to want to strangle the person sitting next to them (spoiler alert: it's not the group who've just gorged a zombie's eyes out in their game). So I'm basically an advocate of the wealth of evidence which now exists that videogames in themselves don't cause players to have a predilection for violence any more than having to endure Piers Morgan first thing in the morning.

Personally I've veered towards slower narrative-driven or Nintendo games over the years and have avoided explicitly violent games just as a matter of taste, but the avalanche of praise heaped on *God Of War* persuaded me that I'd be doing the limited time I have to spend with them these days a disservice if I were to discount it on the basis of one element. I do think it's an incredible game, but after what felt like a particularly gruesome scene (which probably went on longer than intended since my fortysomething reflexes are slowing) I thought, "Christ, this is so violent. Other people must have noticed it" – before typing the words "god of war violence" into Google and finding the main complaint is that it's not violent *enough*.

"After what felt like a particularly gruesome scene I thought, 'Christ, this is so violent'"

And then reading the list of games in Hype (**E**321) it made me think. There is a kind of depressing tendency that the industry still has to steer towards violent content for their triple-A big hitters – sure, there were lovely examples of games like *Semblance* which evoke the best of indie creativity, but you know the ones which will sell by the shedload will be the *Battlefields*, the *Call Of Dutys*, the *Hitmans*. Not that there's anything wrong with any of those titles, but it's difficult to think of another medium whose output so consistently involves causing imaginary physical harm to others. It was refreshing later on in **E**321 to see Charlie Cleveland muse on how Sandy Hook changed his attitude to games and identifying the more general problem with the culture of violence in the States; it's good to see at least some people in the industry reflecting on the issue. I realise the more 'thoughtful' violence that games consider now is better than so-called mindless violence, and hey, shooting things will always be fun, but it'd still be nice to wake up in a world where more gamers knew *Edith Finch*'s story than the NRA's handbook off by heart.
Mark Whitfield

We don't disagree, Mark, but some advice: mentioning *Flappy Bird* and Piers Morgan in the same paragraph is a very good way to talk your way out of a free PS Plus subscription.

Seen and not seen

I've been reading your magazine since issue eight (I couldn't afford to before then) and for as long as I can remember there has been a message buried deep in the text, found below the names of the people who produce your magazine.

In parallel to this I've written a few times to Dispatches, and had a few of my letters printed. But the pleasure of seeing my name in your pages paled into insignificance compared to one day, out of the blue a good few months ago, when **Edge** acknowledged that a persistent few actually read the small text usually found on page six. How great too that the message was in the small text!

The message alluded to the fact that if you wrote in, referencing the fact that you read it, 'something' would happen.



I did, but nothing happened. Well not that I noticed anyway. It's been bugging me ever since. I've been scouring the pages each month (sort of, I do read other stuff).

It's like the path to an Easter egg in Ernest Cline's book, Ready Player One, where Wade Watts collects a gold coin but nothing seems to happen. In fact I've always considered your monthly hidden message an Easter egg in its own right. Hmm.

I suppose my point or question is, did anything happen and I missed it? Even on the subscriber issue covers I couldn't see anything. I even took a risk, of sorts, by writing in. What if something did happen and I'll never be privy to it? Or worse, it was so obvious that I'm an utter smeghead for not seeing it? Perhaps I'm overthinking this... Anyway, I'll let you crack on with your fantastic magazine.
David Wallwork

David, as you well know, the first rule of the secret club is you do not talk about the secret club. (The second rule is that there are no tangible benefits to membership of it.) Still, if it's Easter eggs you're after, this issue has you covered, and then some.

Born under punches

I write in reference to your Sony@E3 coverage in issue 322, which was an excellent piece of reading.

I was quite surprised by your overview of *The Last Of Us Part II*, in particular the content of the cutscene which follows directly after the technically wonderful and brave direction of that 'snog sequence' where you see Ellie brutally execute that murder and the tone for the rest of the footage is pretty much set. I personally do not see the conflicting direction here, as let's not forget: this is *TLOU*, after all. If this was a *LittleBigPlanet* game with Sackboy committing a similar act of violent depravity against another NPC in close-up glorious high definition, I'm sure that the immediate reaction of audiences, not to mention every parent, would unanimously be somewhere in the region of that this is extremely 'out of context' for that type of game – and that would be putting it mildly, of course!

This decision in storytelling direction, which is a current format in modern cinema, including TV shows, is to build the characters' backstory in order for the story to inevitably deliver them to either a very compromising or desperate situation. In terms of this plot device *TLOUII* is no exception, I agree; however, would you honestly expect Ellie and Dina to have carried out the trailer with them holding hands whilst skipping to the backdrop of a glorious sunshiney day?

By opening this trailer with a technically groundbreaking moment in videogame history, to then drop us, the 'audience', from a blissful and tender moment suddenly back into the depths of human survival (basically hell on Earth) is not only fitting with the story material. Would this not justifiably be considered a masterstroke, not just in game direction, but also for any entertainment medium?
Ross Shaddick

To each their own, Ross, but we're afraid it just wasn't for us. If the purpose of the intro was to show progress – not just in subject matter, but in animation tech too – what followed merely reminded us that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Perhaps in the full game, that emotional disconnect will pay off. In an E3 trailer, though, it all feels a little cheap.

Once in a lifetime

Your 25th anniversary has me thinking of the past, and gaming's greatest moments. Unfortunately, the most beautiful event in a videogame I've ever experienced was in one hardly anybody knows: *Lifetime*, by Jonathan Giroux. It's a free webgame available on his website, and I fear that it will one day be pulled down. So this is me doing my best to describe that magnificent event, hoping for it to be immortalised in print.

The game is a string of moments in the lead character's life where different choices lead to different outcomes (how to deal with a bully, whether or not to ask a girl to a dance, etc), and honestly, compared to the likes of *Life Is Strange* and *Heavy Rain*, it's quite pedestrian. Hang on, though.

After a couple of minutes, you find yourself, old, standing in front of your wife's grave. You talk about some recent happenings, like your daughter having her second child, that you bumped into an old friend the other day, things like that, and end the monologue saying you'll visit again tomorrow. You turn around and head towards the bus waiting for you at the other side of the cemetery. Before you get there, there is a bench with flowers left behind.

I didn't have to, but I took the flowers and walked back to put them at the foot of my wife's grave. I then took a minute or so to, I guess, just spend a little more time with her. Honestly, I didn't feel anything for this fictional character, nor was I reminded of my own friends who had passed away. So I don't know why I did it... but it felt like the right thing to do.

I like to believe that most other players would do the same. Videogames have amazing merits, such as having interesting choices, and player expression. Never have I seen a game so elegantly steer the player towards doing something straight out of their heart.

I remember *The Stanley Parable* being released around the same time, and me thinking: this game shows exactly what's wrong with the medium of videogames (player expression is insignificant). Luckily, there was *Lifetime* showing that somehow, games can be done right. So here's hoping developers can still learn from this game and that we see their fruits covered in **Edge**'s next 25 years.
Robert August de Meijer

And here's hoping you, Robert, continue to save us from our regular deadline-day Dispatches panics with one of your well-timed missives. Now, will you please change the habit of a lifetime, and accept a free year's subscription to PS Plus? You have to be nice to us – it is, after all, our birthday. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

A lot has changed in 25 years. Dating apps, the Docklands Light Railway, drill music, Google Maps, an entrepreneur blasting one of his own cars into space, the resurgence of the far right, five-pound pints. It is truly a technological utopia we live in, apart from the annoying lack of tricorders and flying cars.

On the other hand, some things haven't changed. Extremely good videogames still have the words 'Mario' and 'Zelda' in their titles, for one thing. And for another thing, commentators still employ the hoary old line that some cultural product they don't like is "like a videogame", even as videogames themselves (titles aside) have vastly changed.

During the World Cup, for example, David Runciman, writing in the London Review of Books, considered the prospect of the next tournament being held in Qatar, of necessity in hermetically sealed, air-conditioned stadiums, and broadcast in 4K, with endless replays and machine-aided refereeing decisions. Perhaps, he suggested, the 2018 World Cup would be the last "when we are able to tell the difference between an international football match and a videogame". Football, he argues, will become "like a videogame" once all the humanity has been drained from it, once it becomes somehow lighter than air, merely a spectacle of pixels beamed all over the world.

An attentive reader of some mid-century French philosophers would argue that this argument has the causation backwards. Guy Debord identified the "society of the spectacle" – "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" in 1967, half a decade before the first commercial videogames. In 1990, Jean Baudrillard announced provocatively that the (first) Gulf War would not take place, and in 1991 said that it had not taken place – because it was designed primarily to be consumed as a televised spectacle. And the World Cup itself has always been, to the vast majority of its global audience who don't travel to the tournament, a mediated spectacle: not just a thrilling spectator sport, but a shop window for footballers considered as commodities in the subsequent transfer trading, footballers who inevitably, for all their real gifts and courage, also match exactly Debord's description of the celebrities of the spectacle: "Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles."



If discussing politics on Twitter really were a videogame, it would be more fun and have better graphics

Videogames, inevitably, are part of the Debordian spectacle too, but to consider them some awful, logical, dehumanised endpoint of the spectacular is rather to let the actual institution Runciman is discussing off the hook: the World Cup as broadcast on television, the breaks all stuffed with adverts for betting websites, which profit from recruiting innocents and turning them into gambling addicts. Set beside that, a casual session of *FIFA* seems like the wholesome equivalent of a Victorian parlour game.

Another great engine of the spectacle that has appeared in **Edge**'s lifetime, of course, is social media, and here casual denigration of videogames also obscures a more interesting story. Charles CW Cooke, an American journalist, recently tweeted: "Political Twitter ... was always a bubble, but now it's a bubble floating off in space, millions of miles above the subjects it's discussing. It's a videogame." Here the author is using the "videogame" slur to argue that what he is criticising is disconnected from reality, and somehow consequence-free. Well, if only it were. If discussing politics on Twitter really were a videogame, we can be sure that it would be more fun and have better graphics, and that it would not in fact lead to waves of mob fury, social shaming, and the general toxification of our culture.

On this subject, too, Guy Debord was prescient. The spectacle, he wrote in 1967, "erases the dividing line between true and false". Twenty-five years ago we didn't worry much about fake news; now the US President says that the New York Times and Washington Post are part of "the fake news media". To call such cultural deterioration a phenomenon in which things are becoming more like videogames is, again, to get things backwards. Videogames, for the most part, build for us ideal worlds in which truth itself is stable: in which objects do what the description promises, and mission briefings contain trustworthy intel. If only the modern world were more like a videogame, we wouldn't be in the trouble we are now.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

Illustration kaeru.com.ar



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

During the almost eight years I've been working on **Edge**, Japan trips have been a rare commodity. I joined the team at the peak of the 360 era, when western developers ruled the roost, and big Japanese publishers were struggling to catch up. So, if there was a trip overseas, it was almost always taking you to the US, and mostly the west coast. Yes, there'd be the odd bit of Canada, and a fair bit of Nordic action. But in my first six years on **Edge**, I went to Japan once. I just got back from my fourth trip in 18 months. Japanese game development is back.

Thank god. When I fell in love with **Edge** in the early 2000s it wasn't the reportage on western games that drew me in; it was the unearthing of far-eastern curios. It was *Katamari* and *Rez, God Hand* and *Ryu Ga Gotoku*. Games with an otherworldly quality that this grown-up, well-travelled mag had handpicked for me and me alone. It was a western magazine with, I felt, a Japanese soul.

As such it heartens me greatly to see Japan punching its weight again – not least because it gives me an excuse to go back. It's changed a lot since I first went in 2005, when the only place you could reliably find an English speaker was your hotel, and as soon as you set foot outside you were on your own, with only your (meticulous) plan for the day and a Lonely Planet guidebook for company. Now English is spoken all over, and Google Maps, powered by a rented WiFi hotspot, will get you from door to door, right down to the train platform numbers.

That's a good thing, though I'll admit a little of the magic has gone. I fell in love with Japan because it made me feel like I'd travelled to another planet: it's science fiction made real, an immaculate riot of neon, an impenetrable language written in a baffling alphabet (okay, series of alphabets), concentrations of far too many people in too-small spaces that work better than any city I've ever visited. And everyone's so *nice*.

Yet it's certainly changed. I remember walking into game stores in 2005 looking, for a laugh as much as anything, for a western-developed game. One shop in Akihabara had a tiny little Xbox section with absurdly overpriced copies of *Halo* and the like. Now, outside Yodobashi Camera's flagship game store in Shinjuku, Tokyo, a small display of *Spider-Man* boxes sits beneath a TV screen showing footage of *Detroit: Become Human*. I walk inside, and the first thing I hear is English-language commentary from a demo pod running *FIFA 18*.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

I fell in love with Japan because it made me feel like I'd travelled to another planet: it's science fiction made real

The shelves themselves tell a slightly different story – though there are still plenty of western games available – but much of the old mystique is gone, largely because worldwide releases are so common. You used to be able to walk in and buy the latest hot Japanese game months ahead of its western release. Now they're probably already out at home, or soon to be, and in any case there's nothing here that I can't get from my sofa using Play-Asia credit and a Japanese PSN or eShop account. And don't get me started on the exchange rate.

With the Akihabara retro stores long since cleared out by eBay scalpers – and prices having risen further to deter them – a videogame pilgrimage to Japan isn't what it used to be. Most saddeningly of all, the arcade scene is really struggling. I remember walking into the basement of a Shinjuku Club Sega on a Friday night and seeing the place packed with young salarymen, their suit jackets slung over their shoulders, cigarettes dangling from mouths as they lined up to play fighting games. I went back there last month and found a handful of people playing *Dissidia* and *Blazblue*, and an awful lot of empty space. They had one *Street Fighter IV* set-up in the whole place. I played three matches of Arcade mode, got bored and walked off.

The point of all this, I suppose, is that while Japan is healing from its 360-era woes, it still bears the scars. Yet there is still nowhere else quite like it, and the very fact that I'm often getting to go out there suggests that things are on the mend. My most recent trip was, chiefly, to interview Toshihiro Nagoshi, a former **Edge** columnist and as such a perfect fit for our 25th anniversary issue. As we left his office, out by the elevator, I saw a stack of magazines. Beneath a mountain of Dengeki PlayStations I saw a spine I recognised. **Edge** 255, *The Witcher 3*. My first cover story. It was too perfect. With a half-hearted apology I moved it to the top of the pile, then said my goodbyes. The west, I'm afraid, is still just about on top.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor, and is still kicking himself for not picking up the Switch version of* Taiko No Tatsujin



ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

So we have finalised our publisher, and therefore our budget and our rough release date, which means we are hiring a community manager – and I am conflicted about it. These days, having someone on board full-time who can communicate with players, bring news back from the battlefield of complaints and issues and bugs, or help your latest trailer find its audience, is crucial. More and more, however, I find the role and its impact on games troubling.

Interfacing too much with your audience during development can make the act of creation an attempt to satisfy a moving, poorly defined series of requests from a possible audience instead of a focused, planned execution of a (hopefully) fresh and coherent idea. Interacting too much with them after release has, we've seen elsewhere, created a hellstorm of entitlement that has lead directly to deeply unpleasant online forums and generally abusive behaviour between players and toward developers.

But it's easy to see how we got here. At every stage of development, games are more deeply involved with their audience than any other medium – from focus-testing early builds to check whether the game is behaving the way you expected and that players are interacting with it in a positive way, through to the excitement of defeating a human opponent versus a virtual one. There is no movie that requires you to watch it in a group, but we have entire categories of games that are inherently linked to multiple players.

And the very act of being an interactive medium made it exciting and seemingly attractive to let players interact with it even more: to bring them closer to the process, to give them direct access to developers through streams, or AMAs and forums, to the point that sometimes it feels like the audience itself has become a kind of surrogate producer. On one hand this has kickstarted the creation of some amazing communities, but it has also damaged companies, ruined careers, and made some games worse.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

One developer decided it would be more fun to go make boutique beer instead of deal with being abused daily

What other medium would change the ending of a story after release because of a petition that amounted to less than one-tenth of a per cent of its audience the way that Bioware did with *Mass Effect 3*? And what did this collapse under pressure actually achieve? Not much, apart from compromising the story as originally envisaged by its creators and then accelerating the retirement of some really great game developers – one of whom decided it would be more fun to go make boutique beer instead of deal with being abused daily by your supposedly biggest fans.

In a month where writers from ArenaNet have been dismissed because their employer was too scared of the foaming opinions of a tiny segment of their audience, and a designer at Riot left after venting (admittedly in poor taste) about a streamer who had already been banned over a dozen times, it's worth considering whether there's any value to be had from a developer interacting with the audience outside of the work itself. Players are free to hate the content, but they should not be free to change it.

This is not to say that it isn't valuable when communities form, or build, their own content, or find their own ways of celebrating or engaging with the games – it's about what role developers should have in that process. For me, developers and players should be the videogame equivalent of church and state. They both exist, they are both important, and by definition they overlap in certain ways, but there should be a careful and controlled separation between the two.

The act of game-making often requires a kind of willful ignorance, where you can't stop to think about how big the project is, how far from finished you are, or how broken everything is at this exact moment. To keep working on it instead of turning off your computer and going to the pub, you need to focus on near-term goals and the hope that you can make continual progress until you can look up and find that it's mostly working.

To protect this delicate balance, we need feedback and community interaction to be filtered and managed so that it's effective and helpful, instead of enraging and depressing. This makes our Typhoon community manager a gatekeeper as well as a visible presence to the community; they will need to pick through requests and complaints, but also keep the really nasty stuff to themselves, so we can keep working and hopefully make our first game something that doesn't earn us death threats.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick


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HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

In sweet harmony

Mastery, or the promise of it, is central to videogames' appeal. When we first sit down with a new game we fumble around, dying to low-level enemies, bumping off scenery and mis-timing our jumps. By the end, we are in full control of our avatar, blasting through the hardest challenges the game has to offer with grace and class. Yet even during our early struggles, protagonists are perfect. We just don't know how to use them.

So it goes in *Marvel's Spider-Man* (p34), which kicks off eight years after Peter Parker got his powers. Our hero is fully formed, yet he's only as capable as we are; we're given a leg up by familiarity with similar games, but only later do we become the hero New York needs.

Things are a little more comfortable in *Ori And The Will Of The Wisps* (p42). When making a sequel, developers can expect a little more from their players, and Moon Studios has certainly built Ori's sophomore outing with this in mind, expanding the game's combat moveset. In *Fist Of The North Star: Lost Paradise* (p48), meanwhile, protagonist Kenshiro is a martial-arts master capable of making enemies explode by simply touching a pressure point or two. Sega's job, as such, is the opposite, in that it must make its source material's invincible, tremendously powerful warrior feel vulnerable and challenged in combat, turning the master into something of a newbie. Familiarity with the *Yakuza* games with which *Lost Paradise* shares a developer and an engine helps, sure, but only so much.

Let's hear it, then, for *Control* (p38), a game that puts player and avatar in lockstep on the learning curve. Our heroine is as unsure of her newfound abilities as we are, and together, over time, we come to terms with them, our grip on this strange world growing firmer as we become more accustomed to it. Mastery awaits, certainly, but here the journey towards it is the same for the person on the screen and the one on the sofa.

MOST WANTED

Yakuza Kiwami 2 PS4
Despite our best efforts, we weren't able to secure review code for this remake of Kiryu's second outing in the *Yakuza 6* engine in time for this issue's deadline. Indeed, code finally turned up 24 hours before we were due at the printers, making this an even more agonising final push than usual. Review next month.

Forza Horizon 4 PC, Xbox One
With the school summer holidays in full swing, the UK's roads are quiet, and the **Edge** commute is a rare delight. Yet there's always a bus, a tractor or a learner-driver around to spoil the fun. *FH4*'s promise of twisting, barren English country lanes is, as such, irresistible.

Life Is Strange 2 PC, PS4, Xbox One
With spinoff adventure *Captain Spirit* hinting at two new protagonists and their powers, we wonder how Dontnod's sequel will compare to the original. Time travel was the perfect theme for a tale of teen angst, but telekinesis? We'll see.



MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN

Going under the mask with Insomniac's long-in-the-making webslinger

Developer	Insomniac Games
Publisher	SIE
Format	PS4
Origin	US
Release	September 7

The promise of inhabiting Spider-Man's body – a long-limbed figure imbued with unlikely grace, tracing arabesques through the Manhattan skyline – is an easy sell. Filling the more earthbound shoes of Peter Parker, though, a man who is constantly behind on his rent and late to social occasions? That's not so much amazing fantasy as it is lived experience.

But Insomniac Games is insistent about pushing Spidey's all-too-human alter ego into the spotlight. This becomes apparent in the very first moments of the game, as Peter wakes up in his apartment and we pan across an assortment of characterful domestic items: abandoned takeaway cartons, Nerf darts, a homemade smart toaster and – of course – an empty savings jar.

Creative director **Bryan Intihar** believes that showing both sides of the character is vital to his appeal. "The best Spider-Man stories are where Peter's world and Spider-Man's world collide," he says, pointing to nearly six decades of comics stories and three separate sets of movies starring Marvel's webslinger. But how does that translate into something interactive?

Insomniac's answer is to focus on Parker's scientific abilities. And, this being videogames, science equals Pipemania. We walk Peter around the lab, triggering an assortment of simple puzzle minigames as he fiddles with his inventions. In the couple of hours we spend with the game, it doesn't do much to convince that this is a better way of spending our time than doing whatever a spider can, but the real narrative payoff of the contrast between mundane and heroic is likely to be a slower burn.

Ultimately, though, Spider-Man is the one with his name on the box, and the majority of game time will be spent in the red and blue tights. This time breaks up into two broad sections: fighting your way through tightly controlled story missions, and swinging freely around the open world.

Let's start with the former, which practically demands comparisons to Rocksteady's *Arkham* games. Combat has a similar rhythm, as you are surrounded by faceless goons in a variety of flavours – shield, melee weapon, brute – and challenged to dodge incoming attacks while pinging between foes, delivering bootprint-shaped justice.

As well as fists and feet – all on a single button – you also have web attacks at your disposal, used to either close the distance, slow enemies down, or even pin them to walls. A line of gossamer can be shot out to grab items and bring them crashing down on opponents' heads. The whole time, a combo meter ticks up in the screen corner, gradually filling a Focus meter that can be spent on special finishing moves or a quick heal. ▶



The redesigned Spider-suit – note the big white arachnid on the chest – is a significant plot point, but it'll be just one of many unlockable costumes Peter can model in the game







TOP **Web swinging is all about managing momentum, and feels pleasingly physical.** ABOVE **Mary Jane Watson is playable, in segments that mix stealth with mild adventure-game puzzling.** LEFT **Combat animations switch between dodges, web-shooting and pugilism in a fluid fashion.** BOTTOM **Spider-Man's suit can be customised with stat-boosting mods and unique special abilities**



Insomniac is trying to create room for player experimentation – something that seems dependent on unlocking advanced abilities, as you begin with a relatively limited palette – to convey a sense of Spidey as a "master of improvisation", according to Intihar. The violent kind, not the 'yes, and...' kind, although the character is, as ever, prone to workshopping his open-mic-night comedy stylings as he doles out beatings.

The idea, in spite of that locked-off moveset, is that you're playing an experienced Spider-Man, rather than the fledgling hero of the Marvel movies. This isn't an origin story – "That's been done to death," Intihar says – but rather "his next coming-of-age story".

"We wanted to tell a story in another influential time in Peter's life," Intihar says. "Graduating high school is another of those, which we've seen a lot, and him being married with kids is not the right time. So what's another important moment in his life? Graduating university and entering the workforce – that's a very iconic and memorable time in people's lives, which I think shapes who we are."

So we pick up eight years on from that inciting spider bite with Peter in his early twenties, balancing superheroics with that all-important career in Pipemania. The very first mission sees him bringing down long-time nemesis Wilson 'Kingpin' Fisk, via a slightly disappointing boss fight that does little to indicate why this has taken him the best part of a decade to achieve.

Nevertheless, it does feel like the conclusion of one chapter in Parker's life, leaving the rest of the game to take us into the next. It's a feeling that's reinforced by the fact that, once the Kingpin mission is done, New York City opens out into a free-roaming playground. And it becomes immediately obvious that this – not Peter in the lab, not the missions in enclosed levels – is the real heart of the game.

Spider-Man's trademark web-swinging has been captured perfectly by Insomniac. Each squeeze of the right trigger sends out a new line of webbing to the nearest landmark, while holding it down sends Spider-Man forward, whether that's swinging in a web-anchored parabola, sprinting vertically along the side of a building, or parkouring across rooftops.

To make sure this isn't just a way of getting from one story mission marker to the next, there are numerous distractions scattered through the city. Bubbles of petty crime emerge in the world, giving you the chance to swoop in and save the day. Whether a mugging or break-in, though, most of the incidents we encounter – with the single exception of a car chase – add up to the same thing: a small group of baddies to beat up.

More promising are the backpacks. These are standard collectibles, providing tokens for crafting gadgets and unlocking costumes, but because they're webbed in hard-to-reach spots, each presents its own miniature challenge that encourages you to test the limits of the traversal system. Think Crackdown's Agility Orbs – just about the highest compliment we can bestow.

An early peek at a map cluttered with icons raises concerns – especially when we realise

Spider-Man's trademark web swinging has been captured perfectly by Insomniac

Insomniac is going for the full open-world-cliché bingo, with towers that reveal chunks of said map and nearby activities. Fortunately, it's all actually handled with elegance.

The screen isn't choked with markers by default, but clicking the left stick scans for nearby side-missions and collectibles. This brings up the notifications and throws a colour-coded beacon of light into the sky from each spot, but only for a few seconds. Coupled with the fact this scan can be done while you're in motion, it's a much more fluid solution that means you can focus on what's important, and keep swinging.

The only problem is, with the game delivering on the fantasy of Spider-Man's balletic rooftop traversal, how hard will it be to coax us back to earth for the more closed-off story missions? And – narrative importance of showing both aspects of the character aside – what could possibly motivate us to shed those spectacular powers in favour of the flannel shirt of Peter Parker? It's a question that this session leaves unanswered. ■



Amazing friends

Giving Peter Parker a share of the spotlight does mean that Insomniac has a chance to integrate supporting characters whose primary interaction with Spider-Man isn't punching. All the usual names are present and slightly reimagined – Aunt May, running a homeless shelter; J Jonah Jameson, now host of a podcast; Mary Jane Watson, an investigative reporter. Miles Morales is also included, though whether we'll get to see, or even play as, his own version of Spider-Man is still under wraps. While the game is set in a wider Marvel Universe – Avengers Tower is glimpsed – don't expect to hang out with Peter's other super-friends. "What the future holds, who knows," Intihar says. "Right now it's all about delivering a great Spider-Man experience."



CONTROL

The 'new weird' is the new black for a fiercely independent Remedy

Developer Remedy Entertainment
Publisher 505 Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Finland
Release 2019

Remedy expects the unexpected of itself. Its latest game, *Control*, represents the studio's continued determination to shift its own goalposts. For starters, it debuted at Sony's E3 conference this year. "We worked with Microsoft Studios on exclusive titles for many years," creative director **Sam Lake** tells us. "We wanted to try out new things with *Control*, and explore new possibilities. Sony saw what we were working on and wanted to include us in their briefing. Being there already makes that statement that we are doing something in a different way."

In other words, the apron strings have been cut. While previous releases such as *Alan Wake* were bolstered by Microsoft's influence, the relationship had its caveats: the dull television show crowbarred into *Quantum Break* might have proved disastrous, were it not for the game around it. *Control* marks Remedy's return to its indie roots, a brand-new multiplatform IP that sees the unfettered studio push itself to strange new limits.

The story, for instance, is less about its lead character than where it takes place. The Oldest House is the headquarters of the secretive Federal Bureau Of Control, a featureless concrete skyscraper in the heart of Manhattan that has a habit of bending itself into impossible forms. "It can be vastly bigger on the inside than the outside," Lake says. "And if the conditions are right, if you know the rules, if you know the steps of certain rituals, you can keep on travelling deeper. Step by step, you are leaving reality as we know it behind."

This sentient, self-warping structure might sound familiar to anyone who's ever picked up a copy of House Of Leaves: indeed, *Control* pays tribute to the literary genre of 'new weird', with its horrifyingly unknowable setting and Annihilation-esque rainbow shimmers. *Control* is about orienting oneself in an unfamiliar space; Remedy is doing much the same thing, as it happens, in creating a more open-ended Metroidvania game. "We set out to create a much less linear experience than any Remedy game before," Lake says. "We wanted to focus on world-building – creating a mysterious, deep, layered world that players would want to come back to and explore more." The result is a more hands-off approach. "There was the idea that we want to make this, in a positive way, more challenging to the player. And that comes from the world-building. And from the perspective of a Remedy game, we wanted to focus on gameplay, and let the gameplay lead."

The Oldest House is, essentially, a gauntlet: as the successor to the deceased Director, Jesse Faden must prove her worth by fighting her way through it. It has been ▶





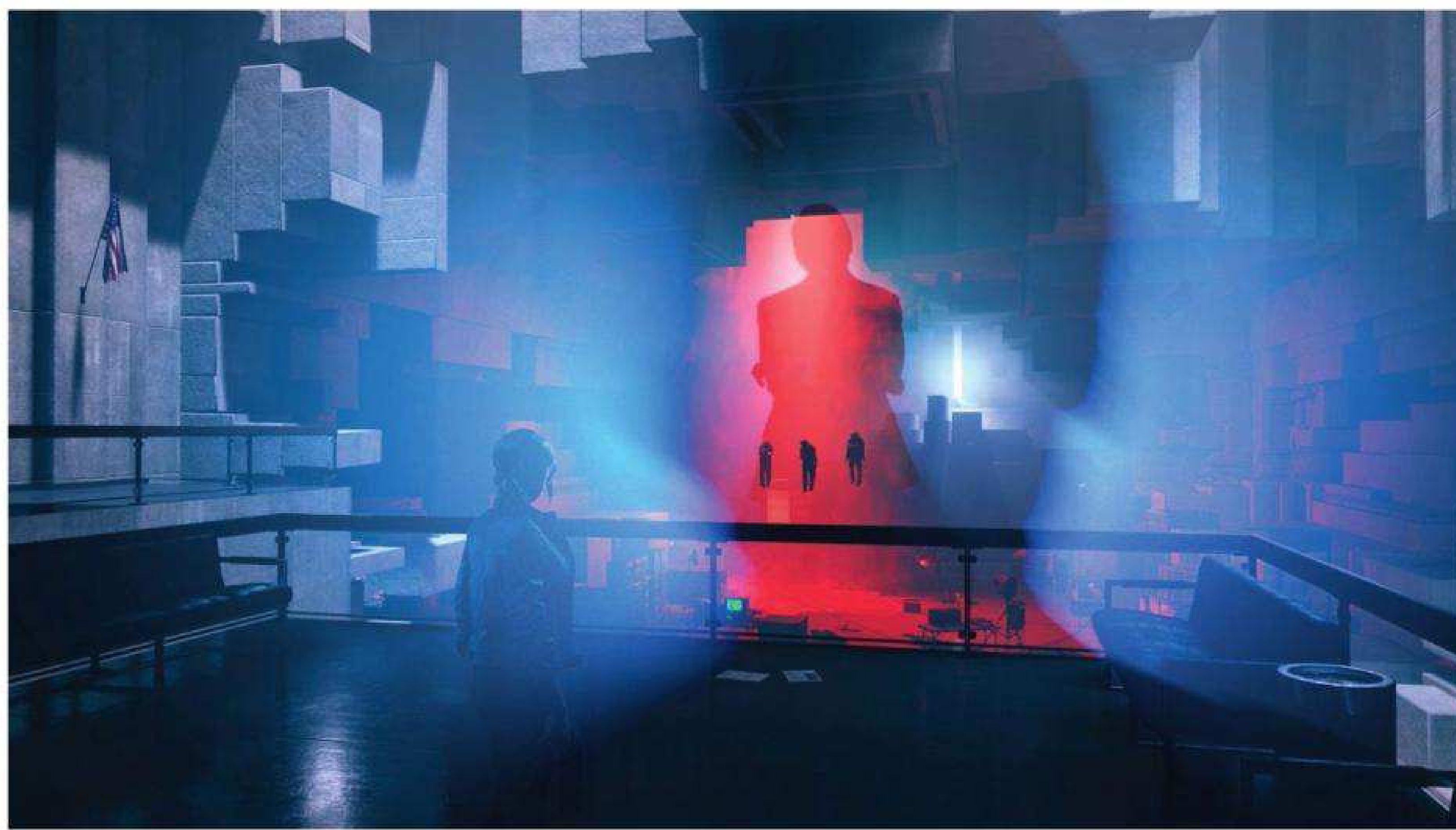
Narrative lead Anna Megill (top); creative director Sam Lake



ABOVE **The bodies floating around the Bureau are those of corrupted fellow agents. They're equally as capable as you, with telekinetic abilities and the power of flight – fighting them is a challenge.** LEFT **The first rumblings of what would become *Control* started back when Remedy was working on *Alan Wake*. Recent hire Anna Megill is "obsessed" with the 'new weird' literary genre: "When Sam [Lake] pitched the idea of *Control*, I fell in love. I'm sitting there thinking, 'Oh my god, this is the game I've been waiting for'"**

LEFT **While Faden can hide behind cover, her enemies take delight in smashing it; high-mobility powers are essential to surviving in The Oldest House.**
BELOW **Side-missions tempt the player away from the main story quest. This man begs you to take his place watching the refrigerator: he's afraid it will "deviate" if not constantly monitored**

ABOVE **Your main objective is to hunt Objects Of Power; they are the means by which you progress, as they bestow Faden with new abilities.**
RIGHT **Lake: "For me, the interesting thing has always been finding new mediums of storytelling or meta-storytelling. In *Quantum Break*, it was 'Let's put in a TV show'. Here, it's letting the world do the storytelling. We take elements from roleplaying design with NPCs, and opportunities to have discussions with them. You pursue the mysteries you are interested in"**





invaded by the Hiss, an otherworldly force that has possessed and twisted the Bureau's agents. By using the supernatural powers she acquires on her journey, she must wrestle the chaos into submission and track down Objects Of Power. Some abilities are more combat-focused – summoning nearby rubble to form a protective shield, for instance, or using telekinesis to fling a forklift truck into flying enemies. Others offer mobility: levitation allows Faden to reach areas she couldn't before, treading invisible water as she floats daintily towards a concrete ledge. Our demo sees Faden's control over her levitation ability grow from a wobbly hover to fully controllable flight during mid-air combat against Hiss-corrupted agents – of equal capability. Faden is not the only one who has gained powers by entering The Oldest House, it seems.

She does have the Service Weapon on her side, however. The pistol expands and contracts in tandem with Faden's breathing at rest, magnetic pieces spinning wildly when firing shots over her shoulder. "It's the Director's gun – we are doing a modern spin on the King Arthur legend," Lake says. "She finds this and picks it up very early in the game. She doesn't really understand what it means, but it brings responsibility and a lot of power."

And Faden has another advantage: her intuition. *Control* is filled with Rituals that demand a knowledge of The Oldest House's bizarre rules to complete. "They're not puzzles in the traditional sense," narrative lead **Anna Megill** says. We find it difficult to figure out what they *are* exactly: the Ritual in our demo is fairly recognisable as a kind of dream logic, as Faden flicks a lightswitch on and off to change where a doorway leads. But others are more obscure. "There are two paths through," Megill says. "You can logic your way through trial-and-error, or you can intuitively understand it. The Bureau logics their way through, and Jesse intuitively understands that this is how it should be. The line in the demo is 'Things are linked not by causality but the meaning we give them'. So that's how these rituals work – Jesse just has a unique gift for doing this."

The concern, of course, is whether the player will have the same instinct for what to do to progress. But *Control* looks to balance the bizarre with the more mundane to help guide players. "It has that ritualistic thinking, and magical thinking, and dream logic sometimes plays a role in how to go forward," Lake says. "But also in a traditional sense, you discover maybe a key or a clue, or an ability that you didn't have before, and now you can access some areas that were not accessible."

Remedy is new to creating this more open-ended kind of game, with a structure including main missions and side-quests that weave into the narrative but are nonetheless optional. It was a challenge, but one Remedy wanted to take on, and hired appropriately for. Megill has experience in writing for MMOs such as *Guild Wars 2*, which has heavily influenced her work on *Control*. The structure is "very similar", she says. "Player volition has been a guiding point for us, letting the player choose what they want to do and still telling the story. But it's been really challenging in that it's almost something totally new that we're trying – as a writer, I have never done this on any game. So we're innovating as we go.

> ***"I can't think of a game that's doing the things that we're planning to do"***

"Remedy always wants to push the envelope," she continues. "I can't think of a game that's doing the things that we're planning to do." Indeed, our question to Lake as to whether Remedy has been influenced by the recent cries of 'Singleplayer is dead!' to move away from making a linear game is met with careful thought, and a staunchly individualistic answer. "Well, you are of course never making your games in a vacuum," he says. "We wanted to create an experience that lasts longer. We wanted to bring in new elements – more sandboxes, less linearity, a deeper action game – and see what the Remedy game version of that is. But always at Remedy, we want to find a combination of things that makes our games unique, and do our own thing. It never feels like chasing after a trend, or trying to copy a successful formula. Because then you are already too late." ■



Agent of fate

While *Control*'s real star is the shapeshifting skyscraper it takes place in, playable character Jesse Faden provides the reason for delving into the unsettling depths of The Oldest House. "She had this catastrophic encounter with the unexplainable in her childhood that changed her in some ways, and she's been trying to understand and find answers all her life," creative director Sam Lake says. Her goal, then, is to master the powers that are thrust upon her as the heir to the role of Director, and to discover the truth about her past. "Jesse is curious, she's intuitive, she's intelligent. She's also brave," narrative lead Anna Megill says. "Even though she's thrust into this position, she forges ahead. She is driven." Whether she's as susceptible to being corrupted by the Hiss as her fellow agents in The Oldest House, however, is unknown: Megill neatly dodges the question.



HYPE

ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

Moon Studios goes into all the Ori details of making a potential classic

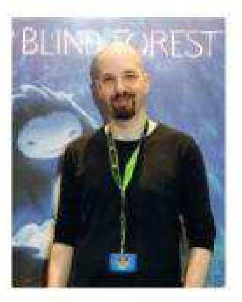
Developer	Moon Studios
Publisher	Microsoft Studios
Format	PC, Xbox One
Origin	Austria
Release	2019

Moon Studios makes a point of sweating the small stuff. Its debut, *Ori And The Blind Forest*, proved this admirably: every hand-drawn mushroom and tree unique, every button press delivering total control over the titular guardian spirit. Alongside a heart-wrenching story, the Metroidvania platformer's detail-oriented approach made it a critical and commercial hit. But a perfectionist's work is never done.

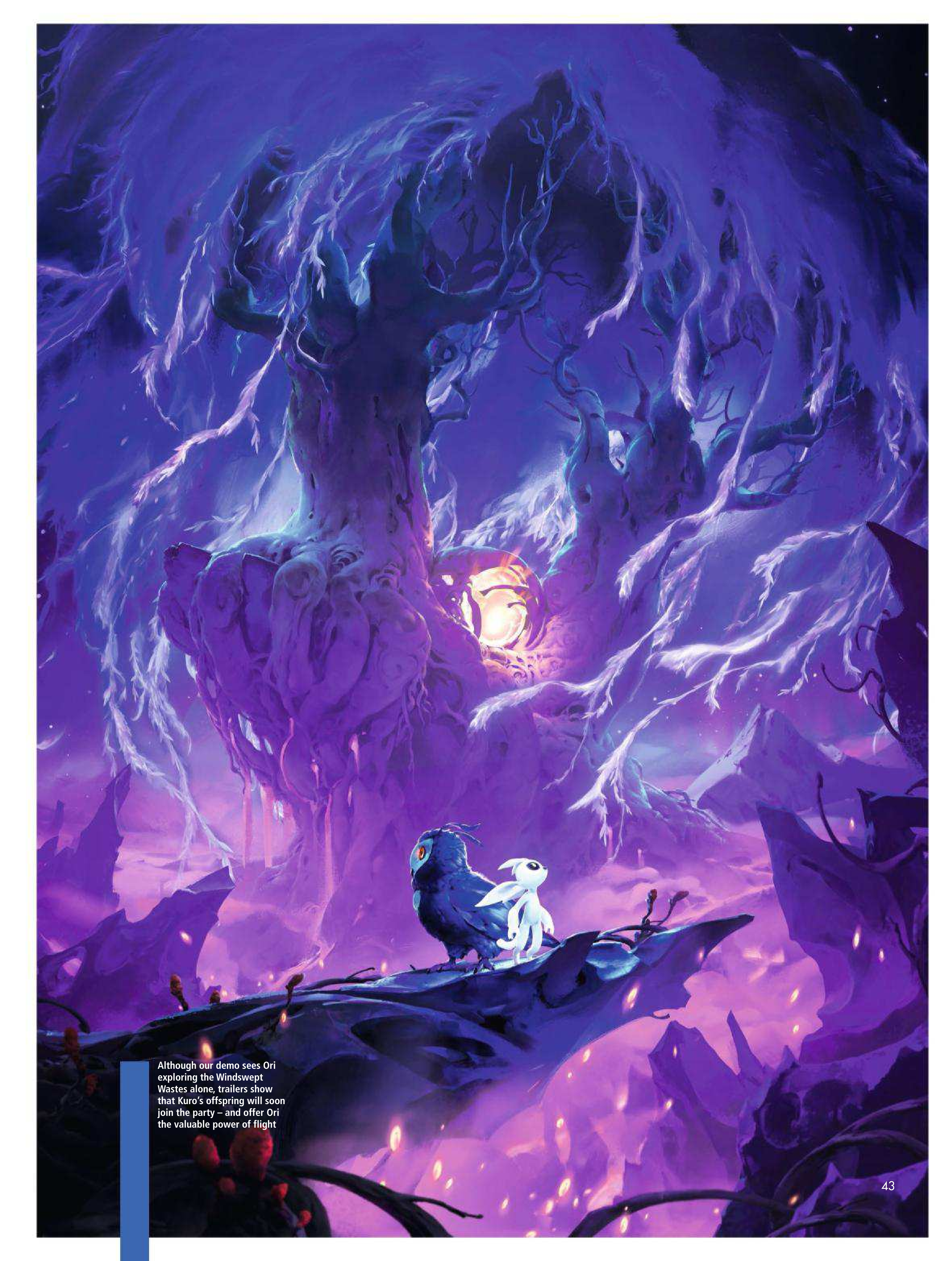
So when, at a hotel during The Game Awards 2015, producer Mark Coates bemoaned the lack of a sequel to play with his young children, the idea niggled at game director **Thomas Mahler**. "He brought up the whole idea that it would be so great to finish the story, and look at it from a perspective of what Miyamoto did with *Super Mario Bros 3*, where you take what you have and try to perfect it," he says. "And I think that struck a chord with us, because we are always very perfectionistic at Moon." What fuelled Mahler was the chance to include some of the things that there weren't enough resources for in *Blind Forest*. With a higher budget allocation from Microsoft – and a wealth of feedback from fans – *Will Of The Wisps* could be everything Moon always wanted *Ori* to be.

First, the basic structure had to be reconsidered. "If you look at last year with *Breath Of The Wild* and *Super Mario Odyssey*, I think the way Nintendo designs is very much like we design at Moon," Mahler says. "I studied traditional sculpture, and the way I learned to work is to block in at first, and keep things rough until it really works. And only then do you start filling in details." While *Blind Forest* was an excellent platformer, its ethereal world designed to unfurl alongside the movement abilities collected along the way, it wasn't exactly a unified whole. Combat felt like an aside, perhaps a slightly crude one in a story about reconciliation. "But the combat system was one of those things where people wanted to have more depth," Mahler says. "You look at all the feedback, especially the criticism. We are a studio that mostly looks at the negatives when reading forums." Thus, Ori's capabilities have been rethought, both narratively and structurally: a new role as protector of the sole remaining owl-child of *Blind Forest*'s Kuro compels the player to put their best defence forward.

Ori now possesses an armoury's worth of options. The spear-like Spirit Edge performs quick melee attacks, while the Spirit Arc bow can pick off enemies from afar. The hammer-style Spirit Smash, unsurprisingly, offers a slow, heavy-hitting attack that sends enemies flying skywards – and, if you're deft enough, a chance to juggle them in the kind of precise combo you might expect of a fighting game. ▶



Game director Thomas Mahler



Although our demo sees Ori exploring the Windswept Wastes alone, trailers show that Kuro's offspring will soon join the party – and offer Ori the valuable power of flight





The devastating E3 2017 trailer all but confirms the continuation of the tragic events of the first game

"In the combat system, we use a lot of really nitty-gritty stuff that you have in *Street Fighter* and *Killer Instinct*," Mahler says. "You have various frames in attacks where you can smoothly go into the next one, or understand at exactly what frame range you can dodge out of attacks. You can really master it."

Each ability can be assigned to almost any button (only jump is hard-mapped to A), and a new Spirit Shard system works as an evolution of *Blind Forest*'s ability tree, letting you modify weapons to your liking. "If you design a typical Metroidvania or even an RPG or something, you might have a weapon in there that a person really likes – but then it was designed as a low-level weapon," Mahler says. "But what if you really like playing with that playstyle? I think it's kind of silly that in these games, the designers basically tell you, 'You can't, because that's a low-level weapon and it does almost no damage.'" Find a Spirit Shard in *Will Of The Wisps*, however, and you can soup up anything in almost any way you please. You can add a broader spread or more damage (or both, the game balancing the extra shots and percentage damage at each upgrade level) to your bow with a Splinter Shard. Other shards allow you to regain health by hitting enemies, or boost the effectiveness of spells. And in *Will Of The Wisps*, you're not obliged to buy abilities in a certain order to progress. Instead, exploration is emphasised, with shards, Life Cells and mana upgrades found throughout the world.

> ***"It's like writing a symphony – or an episode of Seinfeld! There's always a formula to it"***

"Everything has to work together in this perfectly smooth and fluid way," Mahler says. A new multipurpose Burrow ability is perhaps the neatest example of this philosophy. Ori drills, dolphin-like, through deep pockets of sand: the movement allows us to attack the vulnerable bellies of shelled enemies from beneath. It also provides a boost to upward momentum upon exiting the sand, meaning we can hop up to a remote platform. Nothing in *Will Of The Wisps* is wasted, Moon Studios providing a unified system of combat and movement that rewards skill and curiosity.

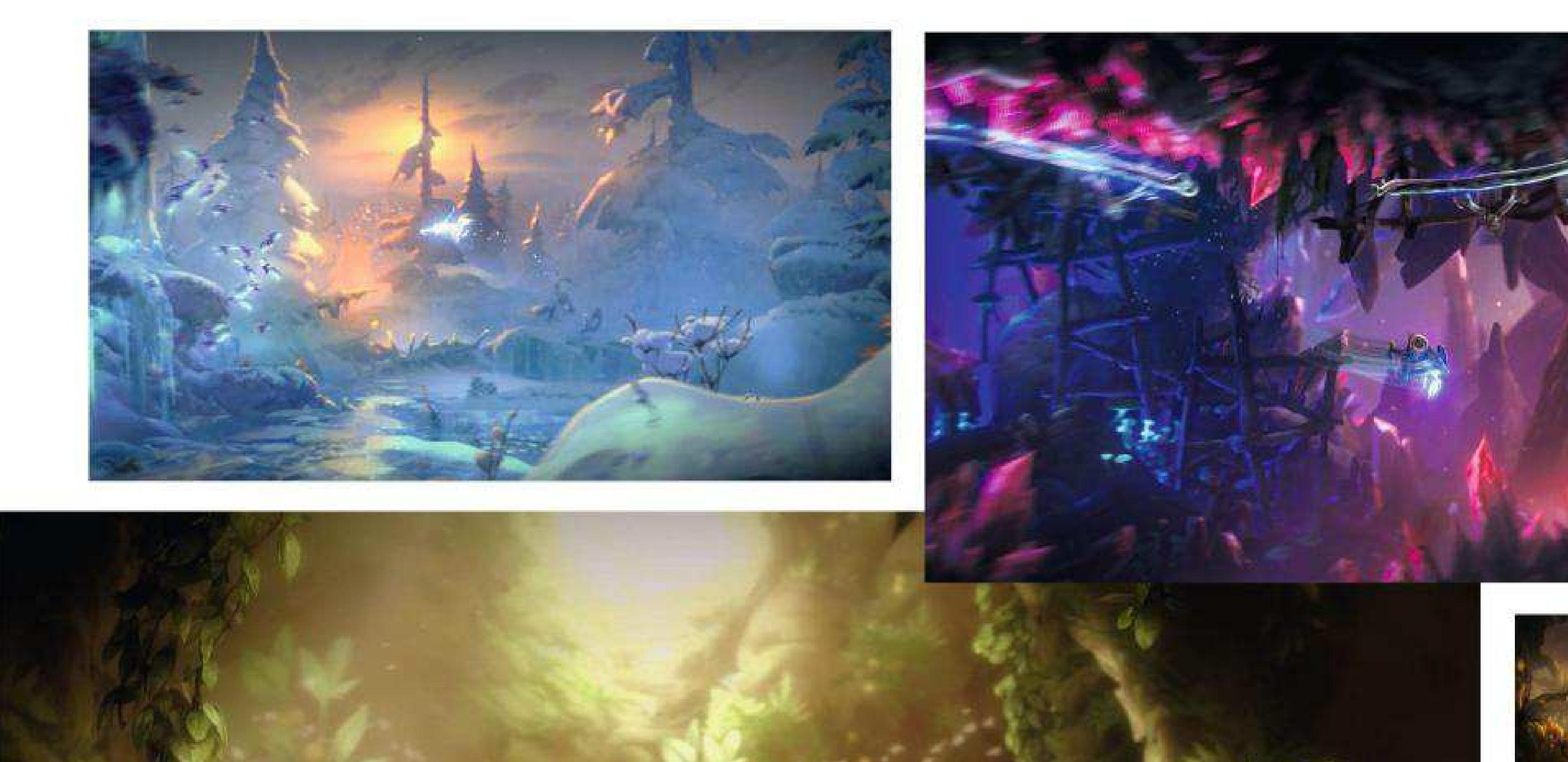
This has, naturally, created plenty of extra work. "With the Spirit Shard system, it was like, 'Oh that's really cool, we should do that'. And then after some time you freak out," Mahler laughs. "Because suddenly if you have this one thing that adds fire to your attacks, then there are 12 weapons, and each has five or six different animation sets you need to now change. There are literally thousands of changes that come with that!" But watching playtesters create their own loadouts and playstyles in a one-hour 'vertical slice' demo encouraged him to go to Microsoft for a bigger budget. The new NPC system, too, has been a costly endeavour, with characters scattered around the map offering quests, each demanding their own storylines, voice acting and animations. But with a track record of excellence, Moon Studios has clearly been trusted to deliver. "I don't think the pressure [from Microsoft] has changed much, simply because we approach making games in a very formulaic way," Mahler says. "It's almost like writing a symphony – or an episode of Seinfeld! There is always a formula to it, and if you don't understand that, then it's just random and it's chaos and doesn't work. I think it's the same with games.

"The difficult thing is just making sure everybody in the team is happy, managing the company, and being the dad of the studio," he continues. "I think that's where the pressure comes from." Then, of course, there's Mahler's own passion for Nintendo-esque levels of detail, which is pushing him to create a sequel that – while still struggling for some truly new ideas of its own – exudes a level of quality that could cement it as a classic. Mahler recently replayed *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past*, he tells us, and discovered that you could take a fish from one of the dungeons to a shopkeeper for a unique interaction. "He actually has a line and gives you 100 rupees. I'm like, 'Oh my god, I played through the game 50 times and I'm still finding new things!' So it's important to me that you have things in there that even five years from now, people will still find and say, 'That's crazy, I never knew that.'" ■



Missing link

Ori And The Blind Forest's 'Soul Link' system, which allowed players to manually set checkpoints in exchange for a resource called Spirit Energy, occasionally proved punishing. Moon Studios is still deciding whether to bring the mechanic back for *Will Of The Wisps*. "The Soul Link system only came a year before [*Blind Forest*] shipped." Mahler says. "Up until that point, we just had checkpoints placed in the levels. I changed it because we wanted to have more things to do with your Energy, and let the player manually decide what they want to do." But with players forgetting to drop Soul Links or lacking Energy at crucial moments, Mahler admits the system wasn't ideal. "Right now, our system works with [pre-determined] checkpoints," he says, "but we're also playing around with some cool new ideas where you still have to use Energy. You can make your life a little bit easier if you use it, but you don't have to. But there's always a little bit of this risk/reward system in there."





TOP **Minecart sequences will offer a high-octane version of the trademark *Ori* platforming challenges.** ABOVE **Even the award-winning art style has been ravamped: Moon Studios is now hand-painting lighting onto 2D assets for more natural-looking depth.** MAIN ***Blind Forest* favourites Naru and Gumo return. Here, Naru cradling owlet Ku recalls her mothering our hero in the first game: Ori is no longer the family baby**

TOP **"We spend a huge amount of time making everything *feel* really good," Mahler says. "Different surfaces have unique sounds. That's the stuff that people don't necessarily understand – they wouldn't point their finger at it and say 'Oh, that is really good that they did that.' But it's a feel thing."** RIGHT **NPCs are an incentive to explore every nook and cranny. The bird we meet in our demo asks us to find a lost needle, and rewards us with a Spirit Shard**



Developer/publisher Tigertron
Format PS4, PSVR
Origin US
Release 2018





JUPITER & MARS

How Tigertron's virtual adventure could reconnect us with reality

Most days, we're sat between the same four walls, working within familiar limits; today, we find ourselves suspended just below the surface of the ocean. A deep, dark expanse falls away beneath our feet. Our stomach follows suit. VR adventure *Jupiter & Mars* is set in the ocean of an apocalyptic future Earth that probably isn't far off, when you think about it. And the point is to think about it. Environmentally-focused studio Tigertron's first game attempts to reconnect us both with nature, and our relationship to it.

It's a story about two dolphins – the titular Jupiter and Mars – working together to navigate the mess left behind by mankind. Creative director **James Mielke** had his own moment of reconnection while working at Japanese studio Q Entertainment in 2009 after watching The Cove, a documentary about dolphin-hunting practices in Japan. "By the time I finished, I was in tears," he says. "I wasn't sniffling, I was *bawling*. I could not believe that we could be so callous. And I felt like I could be doing more." The first idea of the seed of *Jupiter & Mars* was born; in 2012, Mielke would help found Tigertron.

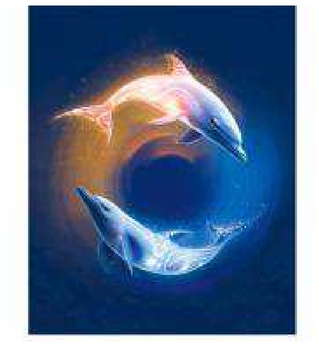
What the New York studio has created is a dazzling virtual space of dizzying scale. Down here, the giant iron skeletons of the world we know litter the seabed: the London Eye looms over us as we swim around as Jupiter by tilting our head. Gentle puzzles guide us: we fetch manta rays, avoiding spiky sea urchins, to help open a gate. Dodging behind rocks avoids audio-harassment devices, and tapping Circle has AI partner Mars ram breakable doors. In one *Rez*-like scene, a grateful turtle mother leads us underneath a whale tail, into a deep cave twinkling with bioluminescent barnacles and pulsing with music. "We are, first and foremost, trying to make an entertaining game, a cool game," Mielke says. "[Tetsuya] Mizuguchi is my mentor, and I'm still trying to fly that synaesthesia flag wherever I go."

It is tough, however, to make a game with an environmental message without being labelled preachy – or worse, 'edutainment'. "We could very realistically be setting ourselves up to fail, because gamers don't want to be preached to, and the environmentalist media might not ever care," Mielke says. "But we want to show that there are other ways to communicate with an entirely new demographic." There have been precedents: *Katamari Damacy* bore an environmental message, though it mainly rolled straight over most players' heads. "Yeah, the garbage-ball metaphor probably got lost in the fact that the game was so fun," Mielke says. He and his team are determined to stick close to reality, even if it's sometimes uncomfortable.

"Our planet is interesting enough without having to devise a sci-fi world"

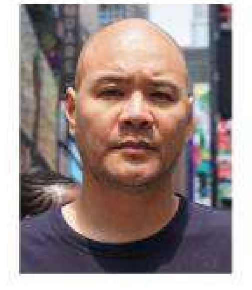
Designed for niche hardware and tied to activism, Tigertron must work harder than most to position *Jupiter & Mars* in front of people. But its trance-like beauty and awe-inspiring sense of scale are hard to ignore once there – largely because they're so grounded in a reality that we too often forget. "Our planet is interesting enough without having to devise a sci-fi world," Mielke says. "All you have to do is watch a documentary on the deep sea. That stuff is *crazy* looking! It's like, why are you worried about Narnia when you could just be focusing on Earth?

"We could have had players collect orbs or coins, and have that represent something else," Mielke says. "But on the news, we see birds trapped in plastic, turtles with deformed shells. So for us, it *should* be satisfying to free the turtle from the plastic. It should be satisfying to use your powers to blow the oil off the manta ray." He pauses, and laughs. "This is a not-so-subtle metaphor for real life: it should be satisfying to help creatures." ■



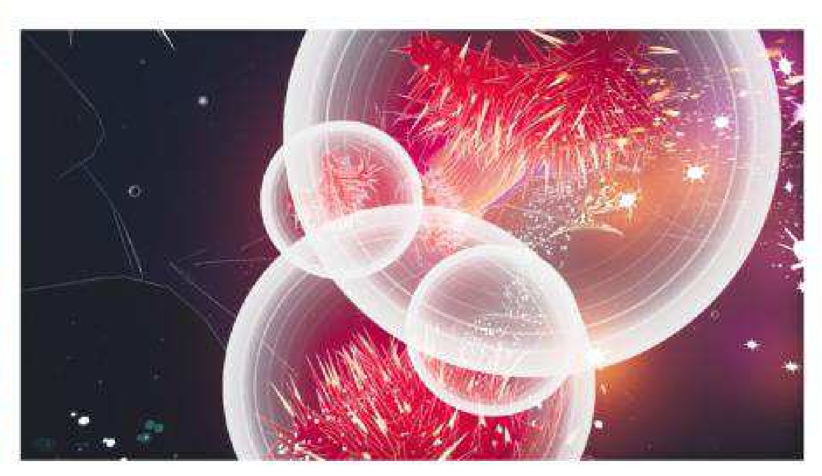
A friend indeed

Mielke's history with some of Japan's most iconic game developers has helped inform much of his work. He regales us with an anecdote about losing Tetsuya Mizuguchi to the slot machines in Las Vegas for hours – "He was just putting the coin in, pulling the lever, seeing it spin, seeing the cherry pop up" – and how the *Rez* creator's love of that call-and-response mechanic taught him how to keep players engaged in games. When designing Jupiter's AI companion, Mars, Mielke called Fumito Ueda to ask what his takeaway was from creating Yorda and Trico: "He said, 'Don't make your AI character too smart'. Which as you can see from Trico, for a lot of people is very frustrating. I didn't really have that problem – he didn't really do what you wanted him to all the time, but that was the fun of it!"



Creative director James Mielke







TOP ***Jupiter & Mars*' apocalypse is inspired by a book called The World Without Us. Mielke: "The message is that if we cut the shit, we can pull it back from the brink."**
ABOVE **The AHDs were a non-harmful obstacle of Mielke's own conception – until he found out they were real**





TOP **Using Jupiter's Echo ability lets you scan the area for hazards, heralded by white ripples and chimes.**
ABOVE **These jellyfish won't sting. It was important to Tigertron's environmentalist partners that creatures weren't demonised – but one dev "literally did not get the memo", Mielke laughs, and is currently recoding some hungry sharks.**
LEFT **Reuniting a whale with her calf is one of the demo's most satisfying moments. Mother/child imagery is abundant, which Mielke says represents our relationship with Mother Earth and also his own emotional state through development, during which both his parents passed away**



Developer/publisher Sega
Format PS4
Origin Japan
Release Out now (Japan), October 2 (UK)



FIST OF THE NORTH STAR: LOST PARADISE

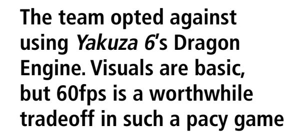
Sega's daft Kenshiro/Kiryu mash-up goes global

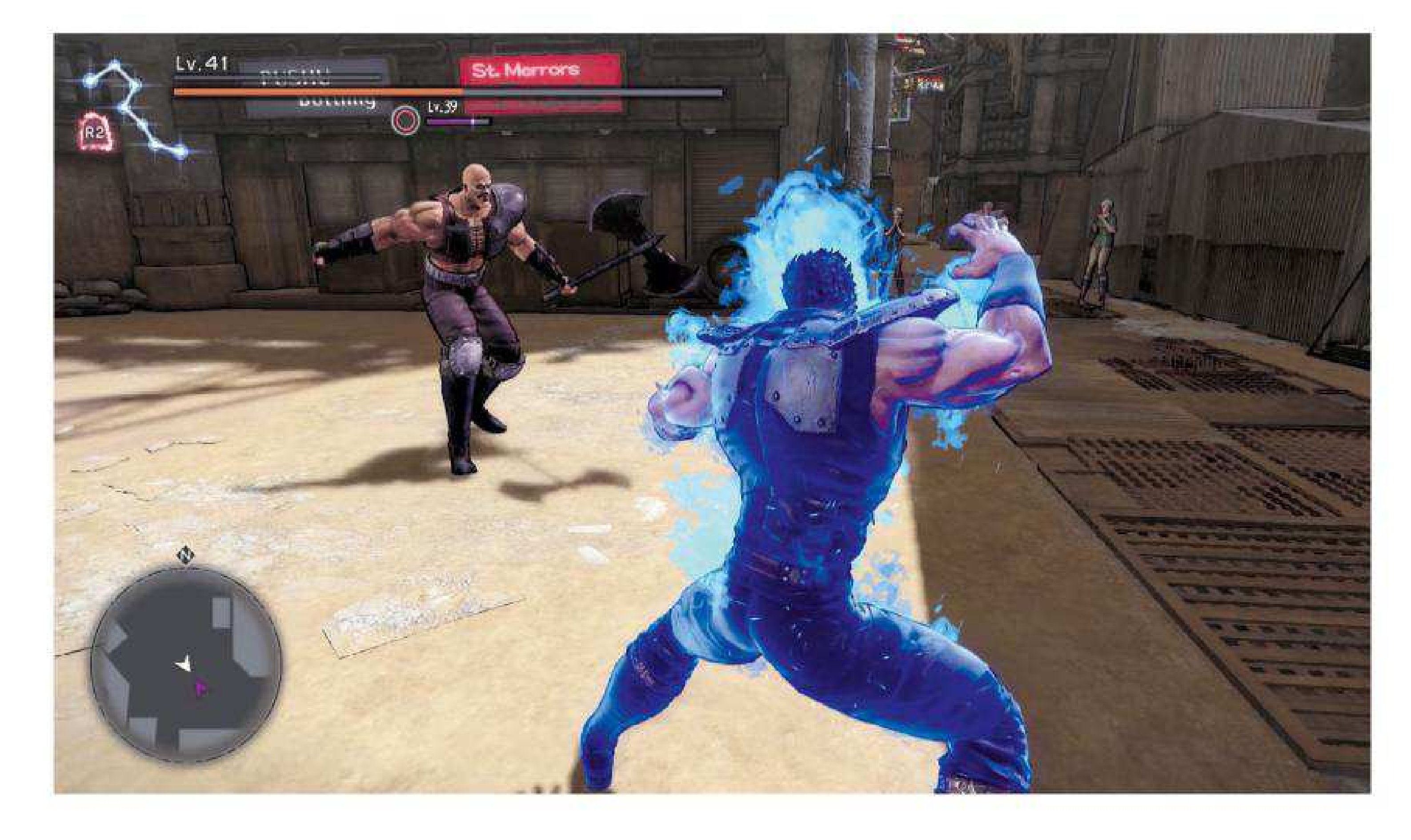
You might think this a no-brainer. Tetsuo Hara's Fist Of The North Star is all about explosive, brutal combat. So is the *Yakuza* series. So this is a marriage made in heaven, perfect fodder for a quick copy-and-paste job. Certainly, there's enough of the *Yakuza* games in *Lost Paradise* to back that theory up. Yet this has been a far more complex project than you might think.

Perhaps the biggest problem, producer **Daisuke Sato** admits, has been the one thing you'd expect to be straightforward: combat. Fist Of The North Star's Kenshiro may have plenty in common with *Yakuza*'s Kazuma Kiryu – both are kind-hearted, cold-blooded souls with fists like trucks. But while Kiryu has to work to win a fight, Kenshiro's use of the Hokuto Shinken martial art means that, well, he doesn't.

"That's been the most difficult thing about the project," Sato tells us. "Kenshiro's so strong in the manga; he can just punch someone once and they die."

The solution is a range of modes and moves that mean you have to work a little to put the enemy in a one-shottable state. At a low level that means whaling on grunts to stun them; on tougher enemies it may mean filling a Burst meter, which puts Kenshiro in an invincible, Devil Trigger-like state,


The team opted against using *Yakuza 6*'s Dragon Engine. Visuals are basic, but 60fps is a worthwhile tradeoff in such a pacy game





The team working on the first *Yakuza* game held off on the blood and gore to stave off attention from Cero, Japan's ratings board. Here, people just explode

before you can dole out the damage that will win the battle. The result is familiar enough to *Yakuza* fans, without being disrespectful to the source material.

That, it turns out, has been another challenge. While North Star Pictures, the rights holder, understood that effectively making Kenshiro the star of a *Yakuza* game would involve a few sharp turns off the traditional *Fist Of The North Star* path, Sato and team nonetheless had to get approval for its more outlandish ideas. It got the nod to let Kenshiro be a bartender in one minigame, for instance. "They've been really cooperative, and I really appreciate that, but there were two things they said no to," Sato says. "First was karaoke; Kenshiro never sings, so that was a no. And while he works as a bouncer at a hostess club in the final game, we originally wanted him to be a customer. But that was a no because, we were told, Kenshiro would never, ever try to chat up a girl."

"There were things they said no to. One was karaoke; Kenshiro never sings"

Yet perhaps the biggest departure from the source material is the choice of voice actor. *Yakuza* fans will be immediately at home when they first hear Kenshiro speak, since he's voiced by Takaya Kuroda – the same man who's been playing *Yakuza* protagonist Kazuma Kiryu for over a decade. To us, it seems an odd choice. For Sato, it was the only option.

"The original voice of Kenshiro is Akira Kamiya, but over the years his voice has changed a lot. There are no rules, really," he says. "I thought Kuroda-san's deep voice would really suit the part. I spoke to him about it and he was really enthusiastic – he's a big fan. So we recorded some sample lines, and he was a perfect match."

Naturally, Sato needed approval. "We played it to Tetsuo Hara, the author of Fist Of The North Star. When he heard it he was like, 'Wow, that's so good'. He kept asking questions like, 'Is he well built? Is he strong?' He wanted the voice actor to be strong in real life, too. Well, Kuroda-san is tall. He does karate." Hara was delighted.

And we're thrilled it's coming west. Having muddled through a couple of dozen hours with the Japanese version – and dipped a brief toe into the western localisation – it's clear that Sega has delivered on its vision. It's familiar, yet different, a game that treats its source material with respect, but uses it as a springboard into something that, like *Yakuza*, finds joy in the disconnect between its serious and silly sides. We'll miss the karaoke though, we must admit. ■



Minigames are silly, though there's nothing here to challenge *Yakuza*'s greater excesses. Very few games can do that, to be fair



You are already clean

Lost Paradise was greenlit as part of North Star Pictures' celebrations for Fist Of The North Star's 35th anniversary, and is one of a host of collaborations to mark the milestone. The city of Chiba is getting in on the act, with celebrations planned throughout 2018; the North Star was seen as uniting members of the Chiba clan who were spread across Japan 900 years ago. The pick of the bunch sees Kenshiro in live-action form for the first time in over 20 years. The cause? A commercial for body wash from Japanese cosmetics maker Rohto. An anime prequel, meanwhile, aired in April on Amazon Video and Crunchyroll.

Developer Bild Und Tonfabrik
Publisher Headup Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch
Origin Germany
Release 2018







TRÜBERBROOK

Tiny handcrafted film sets pull focus to this charming mystery tale

Up close, Bild Und Tonfabrik's miniature world is a marvel. Well, town – the rural locale of Trüberbrook is small but exquisitely formed, every tree, rock and building hand-crafted from real materials and scanned into digital existence. The result is a wonderfully uncanny setting that looks half-real, 3D models made to look almost 2D with flat compositions cast in limpid, golden light. If Wes Anderson made a videogame, it'd probably look something like this.

Twin Peaks is the other obvious point of reference for this point-and-click adventure, which casts you as a young American physicist who's won a mini-break in the strange town of Trüberbrook (despite his inability to recall ever entering a competition). Like Dale Cooper, Hans Tannhauser chatters to an absent woman by way of a tape recorder. And, like the town of Twin Peaks, there's something decidedly fishy about this rural German village.

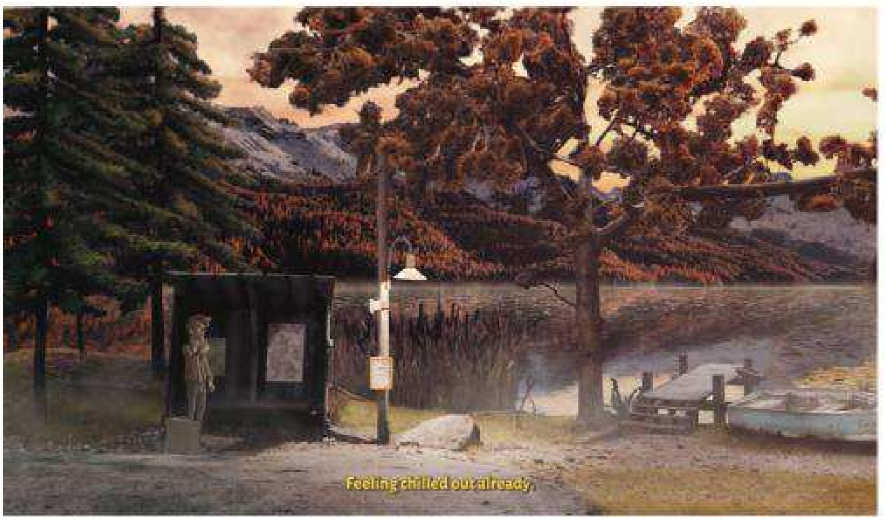
The eerie mystery unfolding behind the scenes, and the tangible handmade textures within them, invite poking and prodding as all good adventure games should. We feel compelled to peer at each faded poster, and marvel at the array of bizarrely titled meats in the window of the local Delikatessen – despite the fact that Tannhauser's commentary often veers into the inane, and our cursor to places unbidden when using the imprecise gamepad controls. The residents of Trüberbrook, too, prompt curiosity, such as the hotel concierge, whose body stretches up from behind the front desk like a concertina playing itself, and a fellow guest who immediately voices a suspicion that something's not quite right with time and space in this town.

Yes, our demo of *Trüberbrook* is often a little too on the nose. But the noses are so characterful that it's easy to forgive. After a ghostly visitor makes off with Tannhauser's precious research paper – we'd question the veracity of him bringing his work with him on holiday, but hey, we find it hard to switch off too – we hunt for it in some of the town's less tourist-facing areas. Not that they're any less lavish in their attention to detail. An underground facility might be utilitarian, but is still a visual delight, the gentle rotation of an orrery framing the scene, the forest of tiny wires sprouting from a bank of machines

If Wes Anderson made a videogame, it'd probably look something like this

prompting concern for the developer's set-builders' eyesight and general mental condition.

The facility introduces some light puzzle-solving. After a doorway refuses to grant us access to the next floor, citing "memory overflow", we scan the room for a chunk of RAM to plug into a waiting machine. Doing so summons the station guardian, and our second challenge: talking it into an existential crisis. Dialogue options allow us to challenge its



ABOVE **The game is set in 1967: the Cold War has just begun, with German student revolts happening everywhere**



LEFT **The facility is plunged in darkness when you first enter. Fumbling around in search of a lightswitch is your first challenge.**
BELOW **This paranormal thief might be spooky, but he's nothing compared to what's hiding in the town lake**







ABOVE **The scenery is all hand-crafted minatures; the character models are digital, and the difference is obvious**

programming and point out logical fallacies – overheating its processors, which we then vent to gain its trust – and strike up a friendship that convinces the AI to let us progress.

It's a mildly amusing tableau, in spite of the fact that there doesn't seem to be a fail-state or any meaningful choice to the interaction beyond the order in which we select responses. But we honestly feel a bit guilty about our manipulation of the (oddly human) station guardian. *Trüberbrook*'s story will attempt to tackle the theme of friendship in its many facets, we're told, including the ways in which it can be nurtured and exploited.

Where exactly all this leads, and how it will tie into the supernatural mystery pervading the tired little town, is unknown. So, too, is whether the bigger picture will prove as elegant as the minutiae. The scenery is accomplished artistry, but its handcrafted nature means there's a limit of 30 unique backgrounds, and that exploration of the town may boil down to multiple visits to the same limited handful. Then again, there's an atmosphere of familiarity to the quaint Trüberbrook that is spookily hard to resist – and will doubtless provide an excellent emotional foil when things start getting even weirder. ■

Media moguls

Along with a grant from Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, and the studio's own money earned through other projects, *Trüberbrook* was funded via Kickstarter in just 30 hours. Looking at the developer's track record, it's not hard to see why: its team has found success with television shows Neo Magazin Royale and Schulz & Böhmermann. It's quite comfortable, in other words, creating things for the small screen. And there are some big names on board, too: once the voice of the German Lara Croft, voice actor Nora Tschirner forms part of *Trüberbrook*'s cast, while adventure-game godfather Ron Gilbert has given the project his personal approval.



ROUND-UP

TWO POINT HOSPITAL

Developer Two Point Studios **Publisher** Sega **Format** PC **Origin** UK **Release** August 30



The core conceit of management sim *Theme Hospital* proves as compulsive as ever in this spiritual successor, which blends its surreal humour and silly puns with an exacting challenge. Efficiency is everything – whether you're balancing training with staffing wards full of pan-headed patients, hiring ghostbusting janitors to deal with the spirits of dead patients or dealing with monobrow infestations – and so *Two Point Hospital* has modernised. Different visualisation modes help pinpoint problem areas, while an overworld ensures you can revisit failed hospitals rather than write them off entirely. The prognosis is looking positive.

GENESIS: ALPHA ONE

Developer Radiation Blue **Publisher** Team17 **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Germany **Release** September 4



A curious mix of farming simulator, Roguelike and firstperson shooter, *Genesis: Alpha One* is absorbing. First, we snap together our ship: after placing a greenhouse here and a cloning facility there, we switch from the blueprint view into firstperson mode to explore the layout. Send crew members on randomly generated missions to survey planets, and you reap resources – if you're successful. Think 3D *FTL*, but with the ability to create your own DNA and lifeforms.

SHUDDER

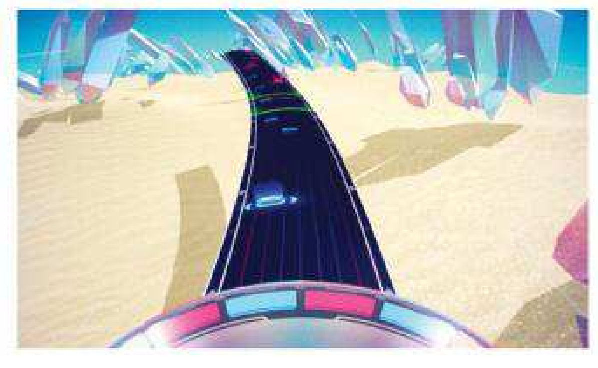
Developer/publisher Saberphrog
Format PC **Origin** UK **Release** August 31



This student/teacher collaboration blends elements of *Pac-Man*, *Every Extend* and *Geometry Wars*' legendary Pacifism achievement. *Shudder* has you avoid enemies, collecting orbs that power up a huge explosion. Destroyed enemies become a currency you spend on better spacecraft. Simple, thrilling and immediately compulsive, much like the games that inspired it.

SPIN RHYTHM

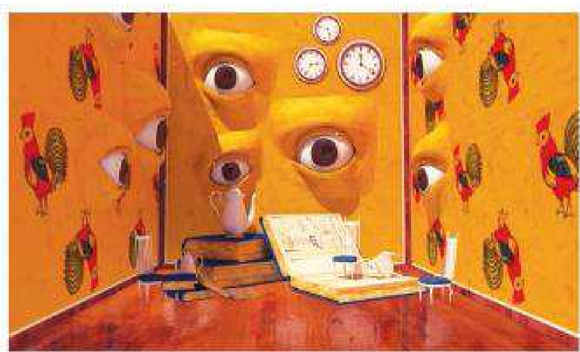
Developer/publisher Super Entertainment
Format PC **Origin** Australia **Release** 2019



Cue the record scratch – it's the spiritual successor to *DJ Hero* we've been waiting for. The demo we're shown uses a real DJ controller and a kick pad, but *Spin Rhythm* can be played with various devices including touchscreen phones or a mouse. We'll be hitting the decks at Gamescom, so watch this space.

UNDER A PORCELAIN SUN

Developer Studio Oleomingus **Publisher** The Irregular Corporation
Format PC **Origin** India **Release** Summer



Set in a magical realist version of colonial-era India, this sumptuously illustrated firstperson adventure follows two thieves leaping through time and space hunting for a mythical city and clues regarding a mysterious death. A decadent, absurdist fantasyscape of which we're intrigued to see more.

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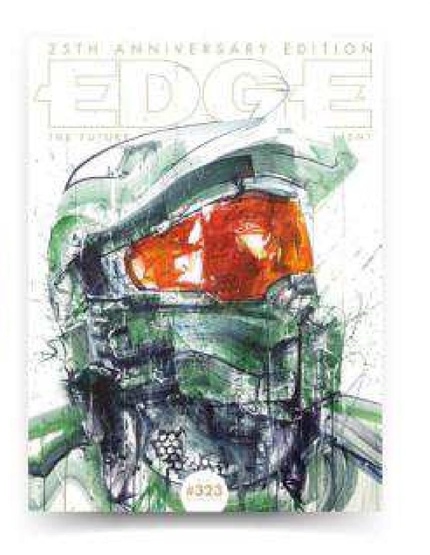
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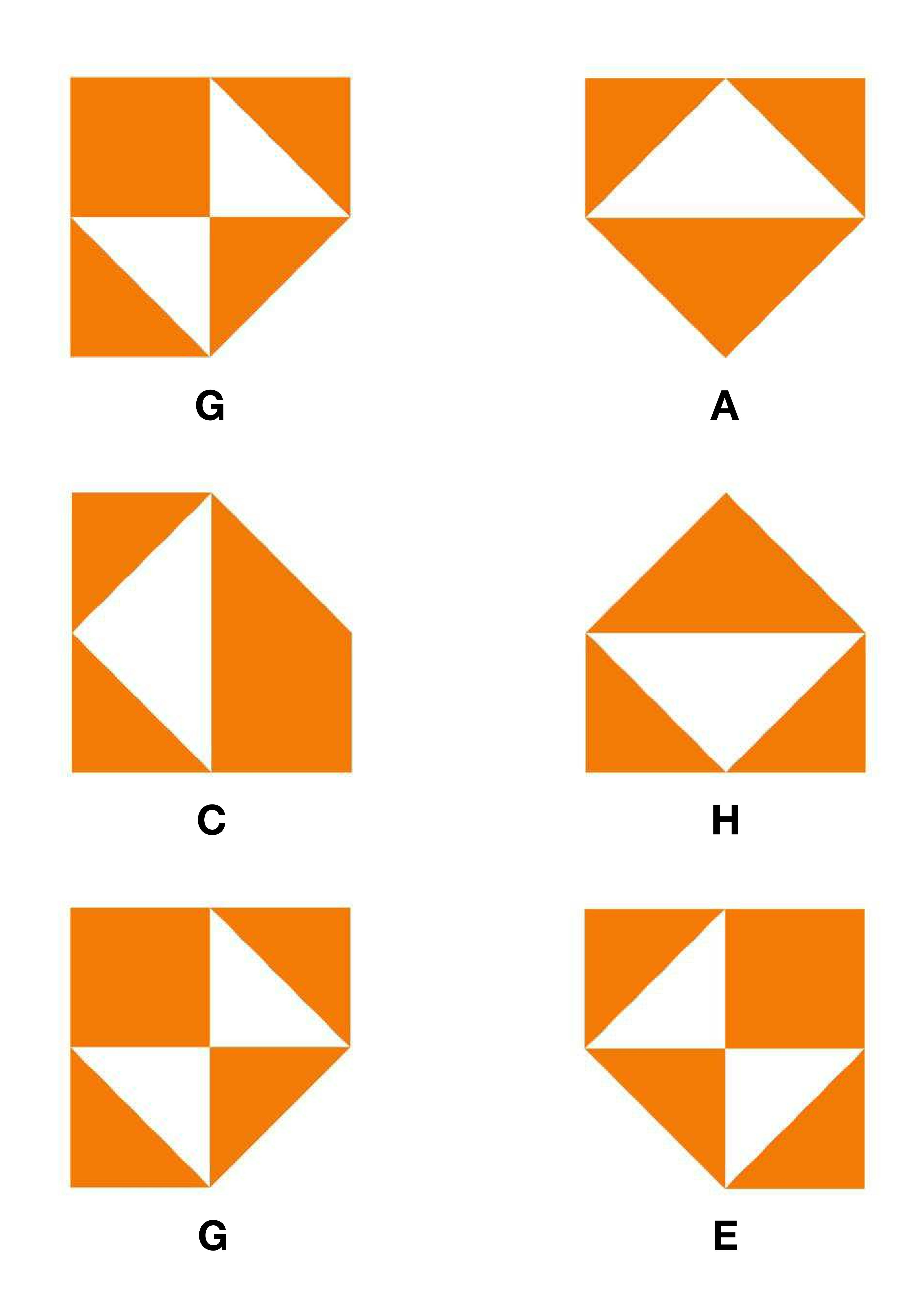
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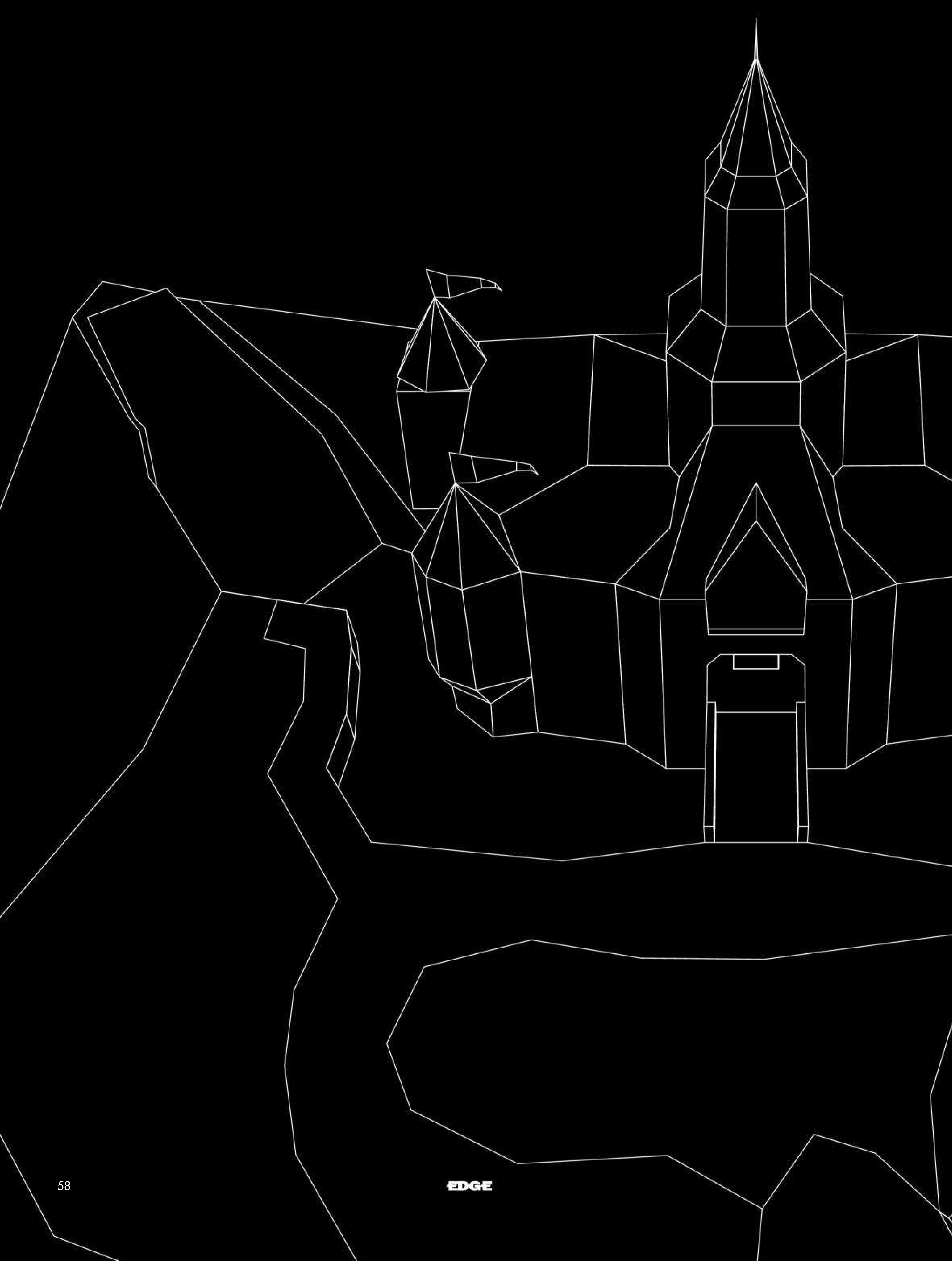
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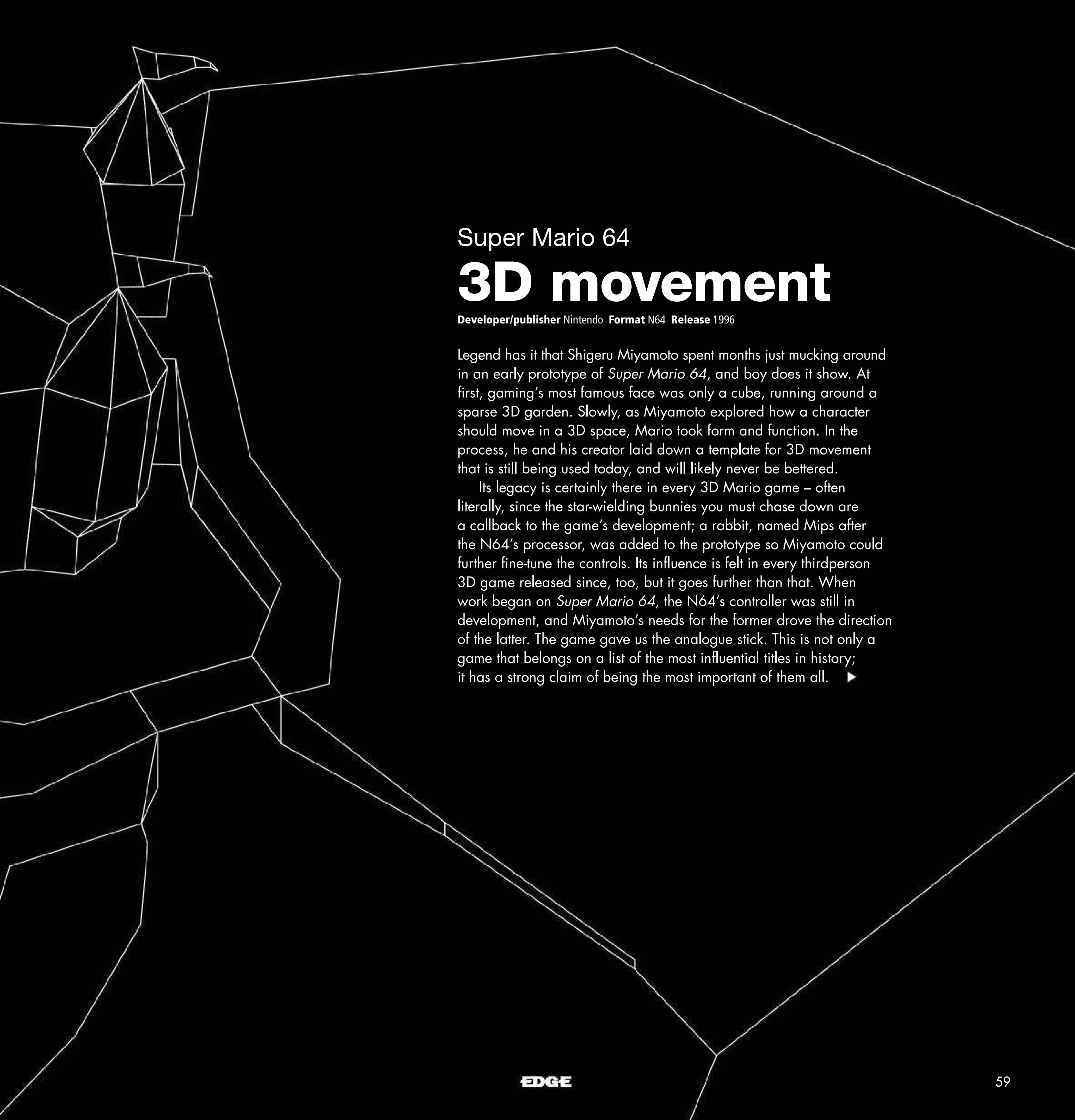

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Celebrating the watershed moments that shaped 25 years in interactive entertainment

BY NATHAN BROWN





Super Mario 64

3D movement

Developer/publisher Nintendo **Format** N64 **Release** 1996

Legend has it that Shigeru Miyamoto spent months just mucking around in an early prototype of *Super Mario 64*, and boy does it show. At first, gaming's most famous face was only a cube, running around a sparse 3D garden. Slowly, as Miyamoto explored how a character should move in a 3D space, Mario took form and function. In the process, he and his creator laid down a template for 3D movement that is still being used today, and will likely never be bettered.

Its legacy is certainly there in every 3D Mario game – often literally, since the star-wielding bunnies you must chase down are a callback to the game's development; a rabbit, named Mips after the N64's processor, was added to the prototype so Miyamoto could further fine-tune the controls. Its influence is felt in every thirdperson 3D game released since, too, but it goes further than that. When work began on *Super Mario 64*, the N64's controller was still in development, and Miyamoto's needs for the former drove the direction of the latter. The game gave us the analogue stick. This is not only a game that belongs on a list of the most influential titles in history; it has a strong claim of being the most important of them all. ▶





Snake

Mobile gaming

Developer/publisher Nokia **Format** Mobile **Release** 1997

It may not have had quite so immediate an impact as some of its peers on these pages, but *Snake*, appropriately, is important for the length of its tail. It's a wonderful game, but was hardly revolutionary in and of itself, its concept borrowed from Gremlin's 1976 title *Blockade*. Its appearance on late-90s Nokia GSM mobile phones brought it popularity, certainly, but few people, at the time, knew they were carrying a new gaming epoch in their pocket.

Fast forward 20 years and the story is rather different. *Snake* proved the potential of putting games on a device that wasn't designed for them, and that was always close to hand. It showed the power of games that could be controlled with one thumb so the spare hand could grab onto a tube-train handrail. It showed that games could still be small, even as technology continued its relentless onward march. In the process it sparked the creation of a multibillion-dollar global industry, now the most lucrative videogame marketplace on the planet. For years, Apple resisted marketing iPhone as a gaming platform, thanks to Steve Jobs' famous distaste for the medium. A visionary like him should have realised that battle had long since been lost, etched out in blocky pixels on a tiny monochrome screen. ▶

Shenmue

QTEs

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Dreamcast **Release** 2009

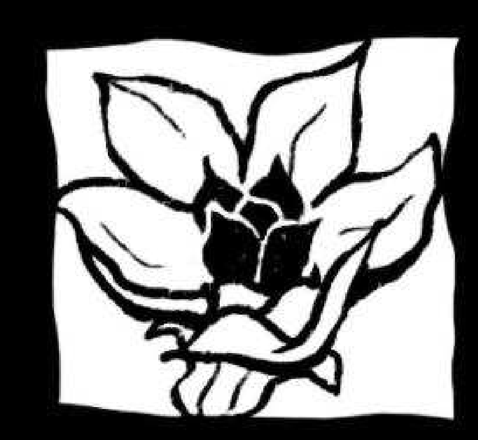
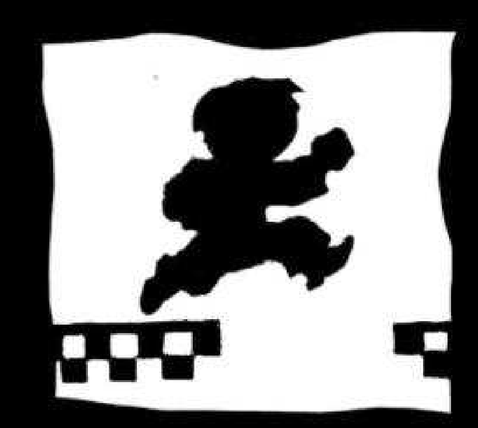
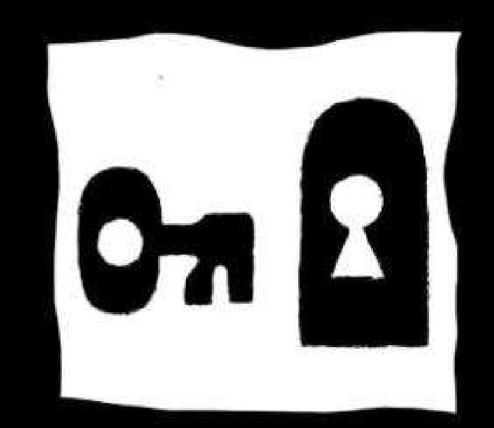
The concept may have existed before *Shenmue*, but only in AM2's horrifically over-budget epic did it gain a name. That Yu Suzuki needed to formally christen the Quick Time Event says a lot about *Shenmue*; while it has since become a gameplay mechanic in its own right, back then it was the only way Sega was ever likely to get the game out of the door. The team needed a way to involve the player in events for which it had not been able to make a functioning gameplay system. So Ryo Hazuki uses it to disarm bad guys in fights; to sidestep pedestrians in on-foot chases, or swerve obstacles in motorbike races; to trip up a knife-wielding aggressor, or free a child by volleying a football into his captor's face.

Almost 20 years later, the QTE is still as popular, and as divisive, as ever. Developers use it as a way to let loose their cinematic ambitions while keeping the player involved. We still tap along on command, wondering whether developers realise that with our focus drawn to the button prompt, we miss much of what's going on around it. We've certainly come a long way from *Dragon's Lair*, but we hope a better solution is found in the course of **Edge**'s second quarter- ▶century.





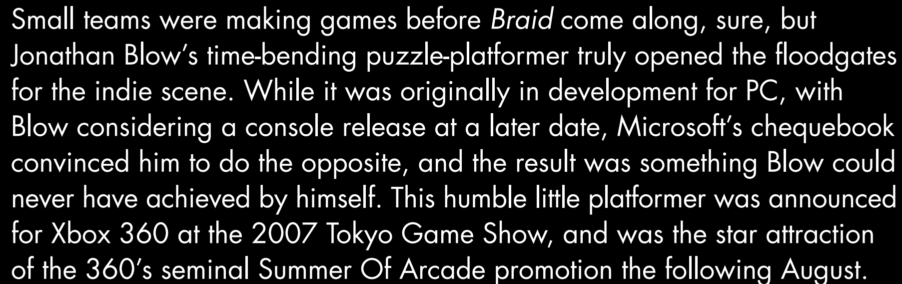



Braid

Indie games

Developer Number None **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Format** 360 **Release** 2008



Small teams were making games before *Braid* come along, sure, but Jonathan Blow's time-bending puzzle-platformer truly opened the floodgates for the indie scene. While it was originally in development for PC, with Blow considering a console release at a later date, Microsoft's chequebook convinced him to do the opposite, and the result was something Blow could never have achieved by himself. This humble little platformer was announced for Xbox 360 at the 2007 Tokyo Game Show, and was the star attraction of the 360's seminal Summer Of Arcade promotion the following August.

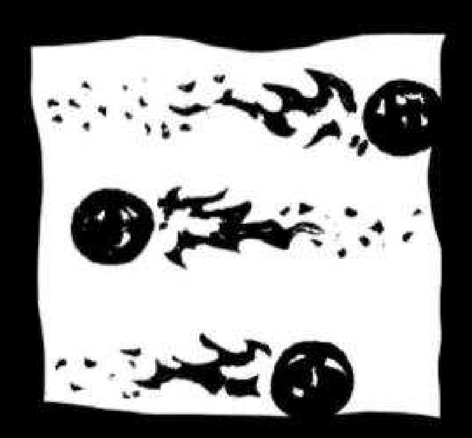
Things were very different then, admittedly. Microsoft carefully curated the Xbox Live Arcade lineup, and release schedules were tightly controlled. Today, amid so many new releases, it's much harder for a game to stand out – and even harder for it to make millions like *Braid* did. But this was about more than just sales figures. It showed the world that console games were more than the big-budget releases on retailers' shelves; that length was not the same as value; and that quirky little works that hid deeper meanings beneath the surface belonged in gaming's mainstream. ▶














Minecraft

Early access

Developer/publisher Mojang **Format** PC **Release** 2009

Markus 'Notch' Persson's freewheeling block-builder has given plenty to the industry: it became the Lego of its time, giving a generation of creative minds the licence to make whatever they could dream up, restrictions be damned. It inspired developers the world over. It played a vital role in the growth of gaming on YouTube. And it gave us a cautionary tale about what big money can do to a person – okay, a Persson.

Yet *Minecraft*'s principal contribution to the industry came long before Microsoft bought it for $2.5 billion and Notch packed his fedora and took off to the Hollywood Hills. He started work on his game in 2009, and a year later started to sell it while it was still in alpha. By the time it reached version 1.0 in November 2011, it had sold four million copies. Today, Early Access, like *Minecraft*, is everywhere. Steam is full of it; Microsoft bundles in-development games with Xbox hardware. *Minecraft* may be the game of its generation – a true pop-culture phenomenon, the second-best-selling game of all time. But were it not for its innovative business model, its – and Persson's – story would be different indeed. ▶

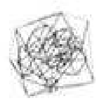
Grand Theft Auto III

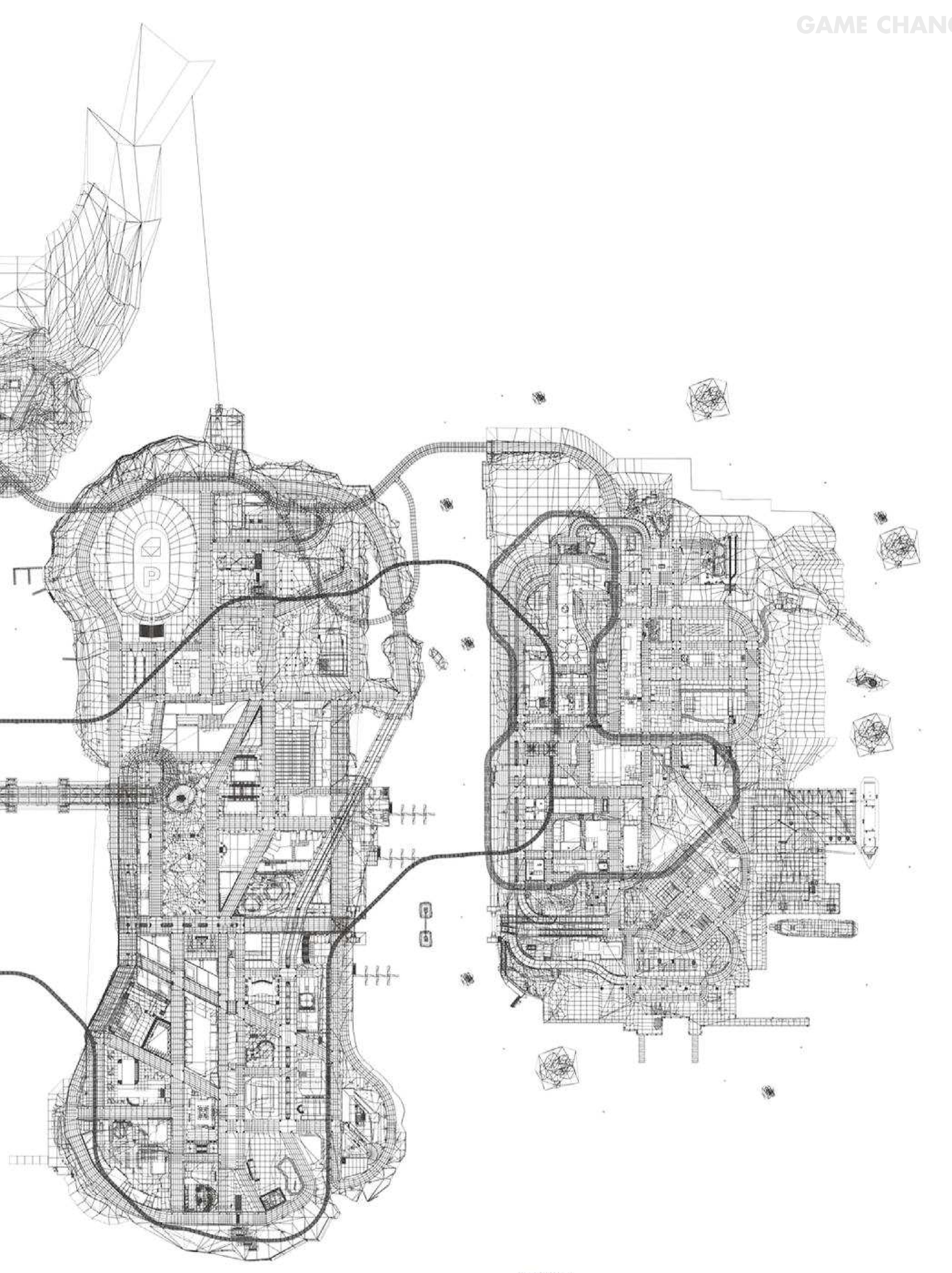
Open worlds

Developer DMA Design **Publisher** Rockstar Games **Format** PS2 **Release** 2001

Some games take a while to make their presence felt, but within minutes of taking your first steps in *Grand Theft Auto III* you knew things would never be the same again. Liberty City, DMA Design's sprawling take on New York City, set new standards for the scope and scale of videogame worlds – and, in tandem, what we did within them.

Rarely has the language of game design been so radically rewritten. *GTAIII*'s sense of freedom – not only in what you did, but how you did it, and when – was a revelation. It was not only an inspiration to players, but to developers too, whatever the genre they were working in. The open world has, for better and worse, become one of the defining archetypes of games in the 21st century – and its time is ▶far from





Quake

WASD control

Developer Id Software **Publisher** GT Interactive **Format** PC **Release** 1996

You could make plenty of arguments for *Quake*'s inclusion on this list; this was a rocket-jump forward for the FPS in all sorts of ways. It was vital in the development of online multiplayer, with players connecting to servers for multiplayer matches or to play the campaign in co-op. With movement techniques such as rocket jumping and bunny hopping, it also greatly expanded the FPS moveset. And it was a huge technical advancement, catapulting the firstperson shooter into full 3D.

Yet it's the way all those things were played that cements *Quake*'s place in history. Since it was set in a polygonal, 3D world, players coming to *Quake* from *Doom* or *Wolfenstein* suddenly had to find their bearings in a world where you could look up and down, rather than just from side to side. It necessitated a new approach to controlling PC games. The solution was not devised by Id itself, but is credited to Dennis Fong, a legendary player on the competitive scene. *Half-Life* was the first game to offer WASD as a default control config, and few have strayed from it since – not just in FPS or action games, but in any game in need of four directional inputs. Over 20 years later, there are rumblings of discontent – Valve boss Gabe Newell prefers ESDF – but WASD remains the standard, and all because Id dared to drag a genre forward at lightning ▶





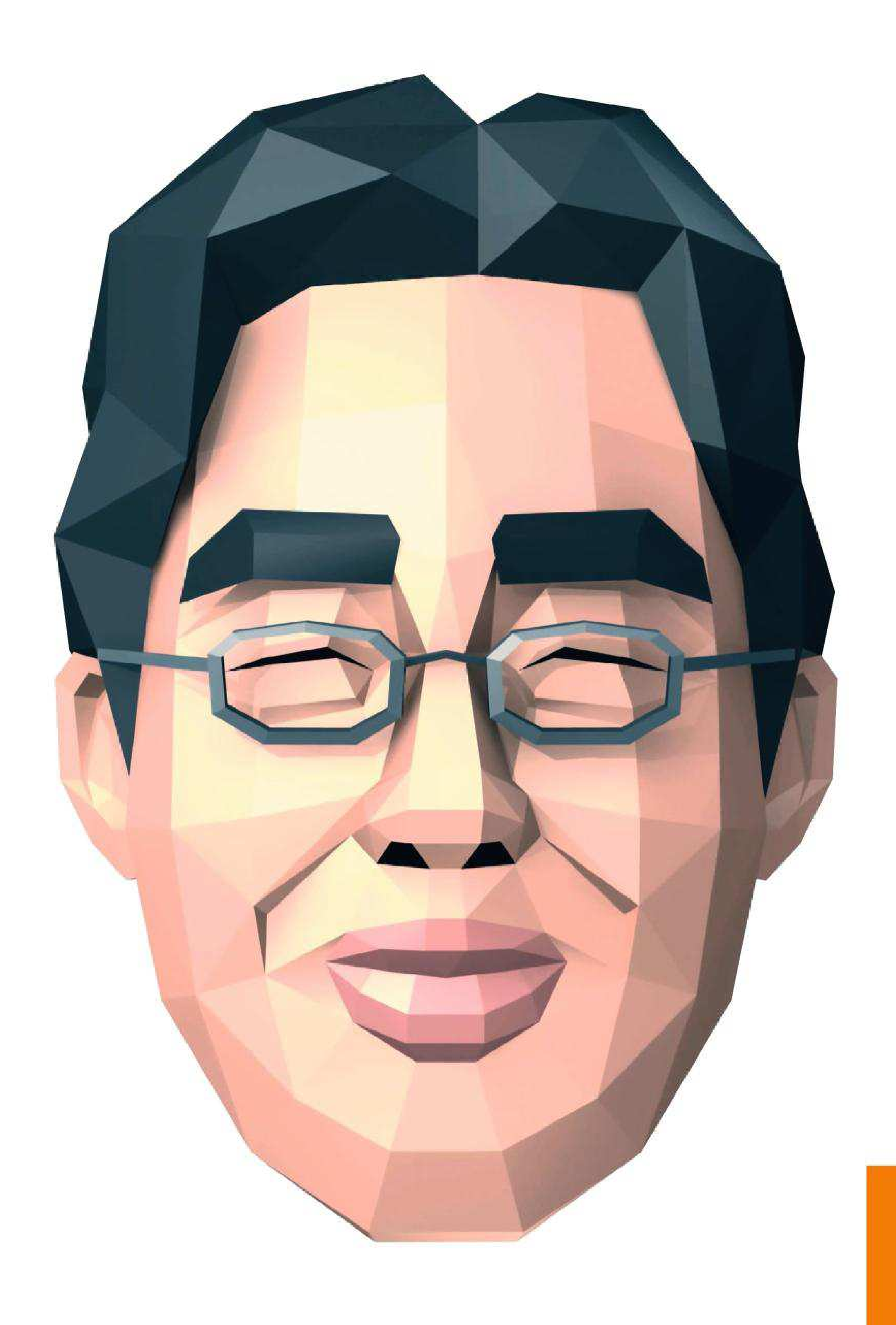
Dr Kawashima's Brain Training: How Old Is Your Brain?

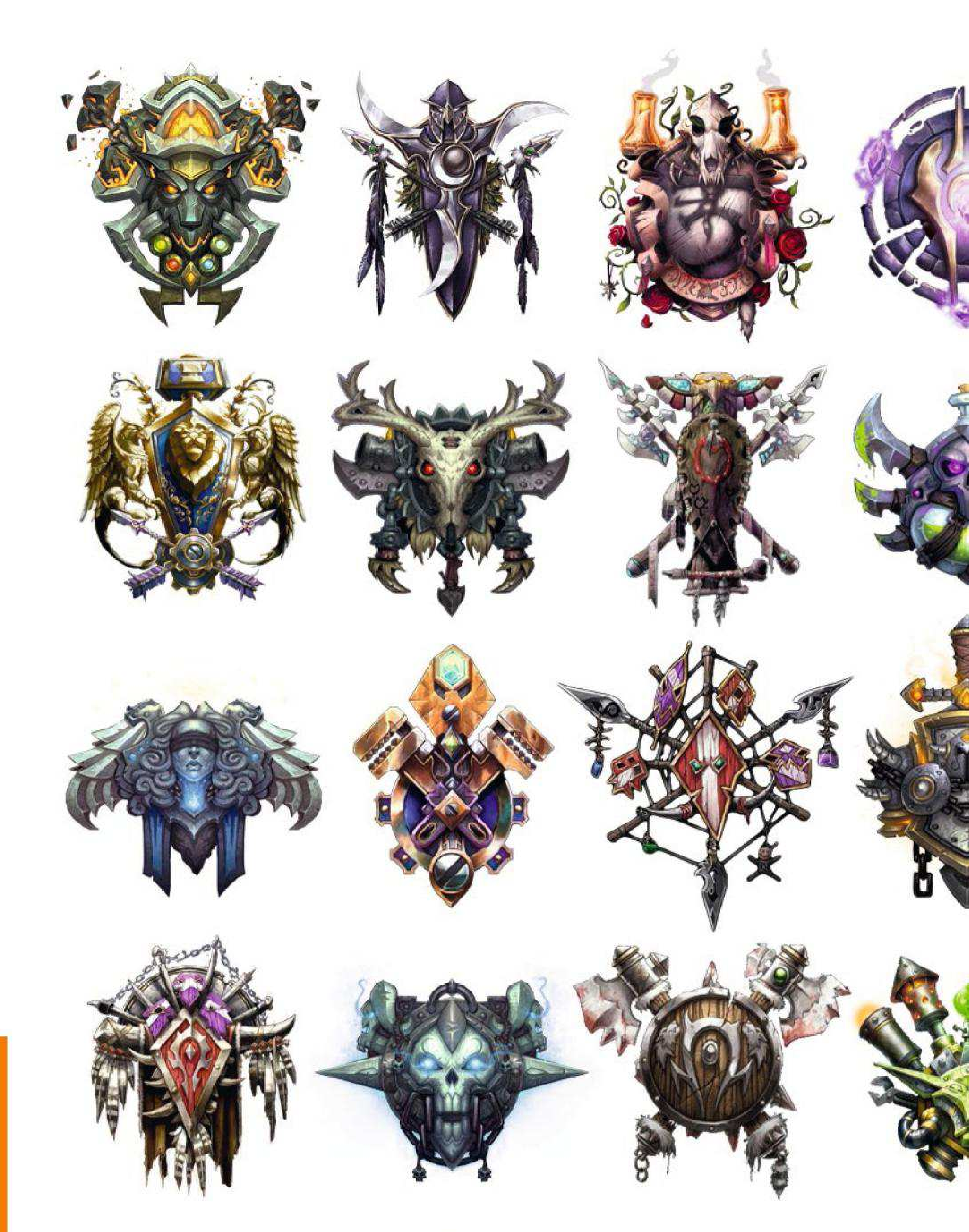
Casual games

Developer/publisher Nintendo (SPD) **Format** DS **Release** 2006

When Mum calls to tell you she's got the brain of a 34-year-old, you know something important is happening. Even at the time, *Brain Training* felt transformative, the first release in Nintendo's Touch Generations label immediately delivering on the publisher's attempt to broaden gaming's reach. It's no all-time best-seller, though 19 million units is nothing to sniff at. Rather, it's who those units were sold to, and what the ripples from *Brain Training*'s success have done to the broader medium, that cements its place on this list.

It showed that games could appeal to anyone, providing the controls were accessible (writing with a pen; speaking into a mic) and the goal compelling (cheating the ageing process). *Brain Training* didn't just put the DS in unexpected hands; nor did it merely prompt a broader industry hunt for the massmarket dollar. It is the quintessential touchscreen mobile game, easy to understand and play, designed to bring you back day after day. Mum may have moved on to spamming *FarmVille* invites, but Dr Kawashima's legacy was already assured.













World Of Warcraft

Engagement

Developer/Publisher Blizzard Interactive **Format** PC **Release** 2004



You could put *WOW* on this list half a dozen times. It may have been built on the mechanical foundations of other games, but Blizzard refined concepts such as raiding and made them feel like innovations. And it gave us plenty that was truly new – dungeon instancing, talent trees, quest-based experience progression, and all the rest of it. It was accessible, intoxicating and, for many, irresistible. Yet no one of these ideas expresses *World Of Warcraft*'s true power.

Its real legacy lies in how it proved that games could be something more. Not pastimes, but hobbies; not passing flings, but lasting obsessions. Over a decade later, with user numbers continuing to slide, its influence still holds true. When publishers talk these days of games as services, of wanting to keep players on board for months or even years, *World Of Warcraft* is their touchstone. It is a game that has blossomed, improved and, with 2010's world-ending Cataclysm expansion, fundamentally changed shape over the course of almost 15 years. Sure, not as many people play it as did at its peak. But even now it has numbers most companies would kill for. ▶

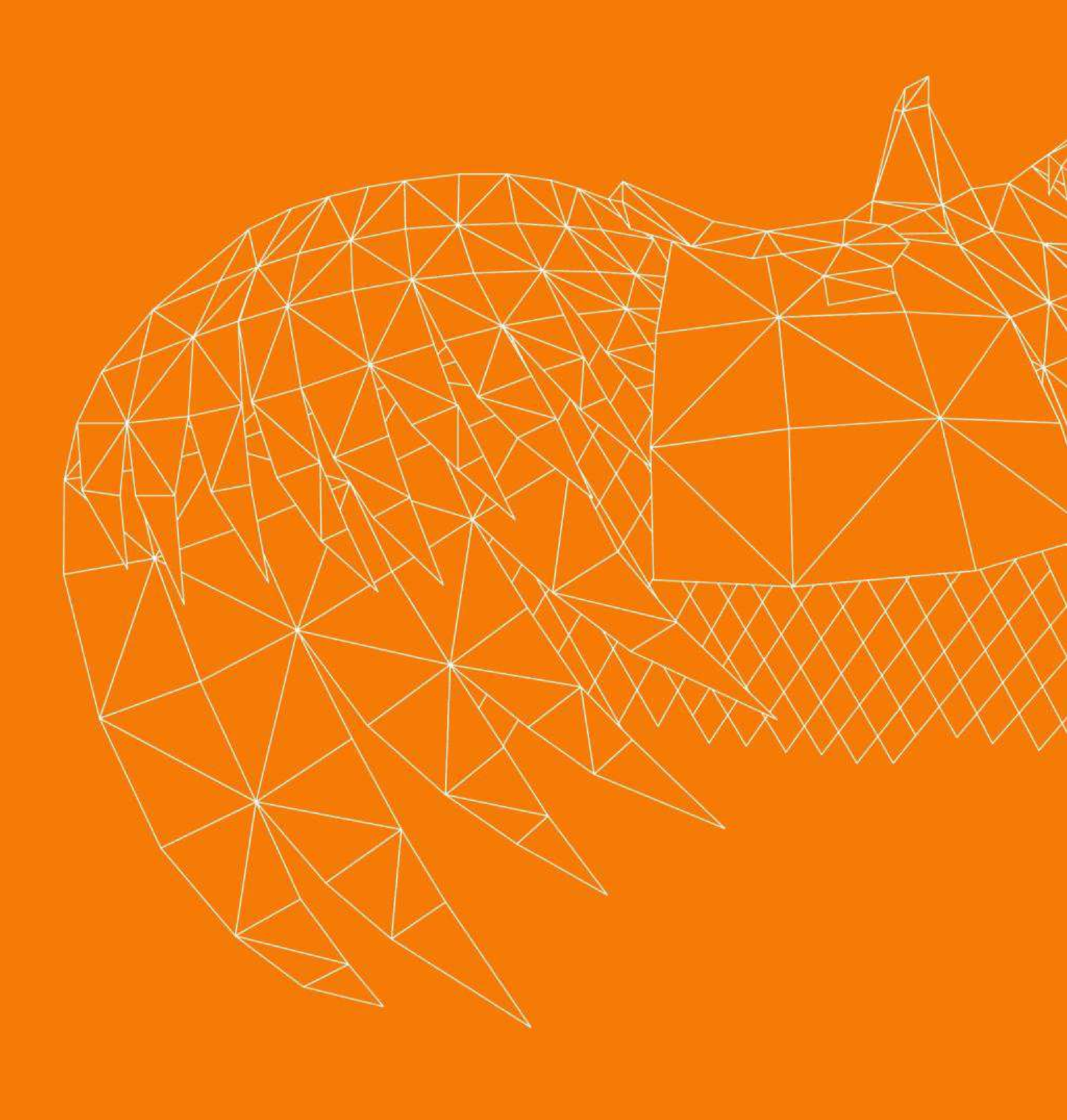














The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

Microtransactions

Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** 360, PC **Release** 2006

Well, not every turning point in history is an entirely positive one. Back in 2006, Bethesda set out on the trail in a new frontier: downloadable content. Developers of all stripes were trying to get their heads around the concept of small, post-release paid add-ons, and the studio decided to use *Oblivion* as a testing ground. First out of the gates was a selection of armour platings for your in-game mounts, stickered up at a then-astonishing 200 Microsoft Points (around £1.70).

We didn't call them memes back then, but 'horse armour' became first a running joke, and then a catch-all phrase used for any kind of low-value, low-impact DLC. Outrage in games rarely feels well placed, but in hindsight the Internet naysayers were probably onto something; these days cosmetic customisation is one of the most popular monetisation tactics going. Bethesda, to its credit, both learned from the furore – *Oblivion* DLC got cheaper and bigger, repairing the company's image in the eyes of those it had so offended – and leaned into it. Three years later, on April Fools' Day, the publisher held a special sale on *Oblivion*'s post-launch wares. Prices were slashed across the board, except for the horse armour pack. The cost was doubled. ■


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TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI

VIRTUA RACING
Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade **Release** 1992

DAYTONA USA
Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade, Saturn **Release** 1993

SCUD RACE
Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade **Release** 1996

SHENMUE
Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Dreamcast **Release** 1999

SPIKEOUT: DIGITAL BATTLE ONLINE
Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade **Release** 1998

SUPER MONKEY BALL
Developer Amusement Vision **Publisher** Sega **Format** Arcade, GameCube **Release** 2001

F-ZERO GX
Developer Amusement Vision **Publisher** Sega **Format** GameCube **Release** 2003

YAKUZA
Developer/publisher Sega **Format** PS2 **Release** 2005

YAKUZA 6: THE SONG OF LIFE
Developer/publisher Sega **Format** PS4 **Release** 2016

RYU GA GOTOKU NEW PROJECT
Developer/publisher Sega **Format** TBA **Release** TBA

Sega's creative chief looks back on a career full of stone-cold classics

By Nathan Brown

Photography **Daniel Pearce**



Toshihiro Nagoshi is a perfect fit for **Edge**'s 25th anniversary issue. His career started in earnest in the formative days of the 3D era, just as **Edge** was first hitting shelves. And after being given his own Sega division, Amusement Vision, in the year 2000, he became an **Edge** columnist, sending over monthly musings on the state of play, or the challenges of running a studio – or, more often than not, his love of whisky. He's played a vital role in the evolution of Sega, working on the first games for the Model 1, 2 and 3 arcade boards, getting *Shenmue* over the line and partnering with Nintendo after his employer's withdrawal from the hardware market, before launching the series that has endured for over a decade, and is still going strong. Here Nagoshi, these days Sega's chief creative officer, reflects on a career spent defining the future of interactive entertainment.

VIRTUA RACING

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade **Release** 1992

It was Sega's first project using 3D graphics. I was a designer, and I thought the graphics looked cheap, which was very stressful for me! But fun is about more than just the visuals, people were really happy with it, and I learned that having a bit of stress is good; it's important not to be satisfied with what you're working on. I was only making arcade games at the time, which was a big priority for Sega. Also, Japan's economy was good. So the company was investing heavily in arcades, and it wasn't much of a problem if a game wasn't successful.

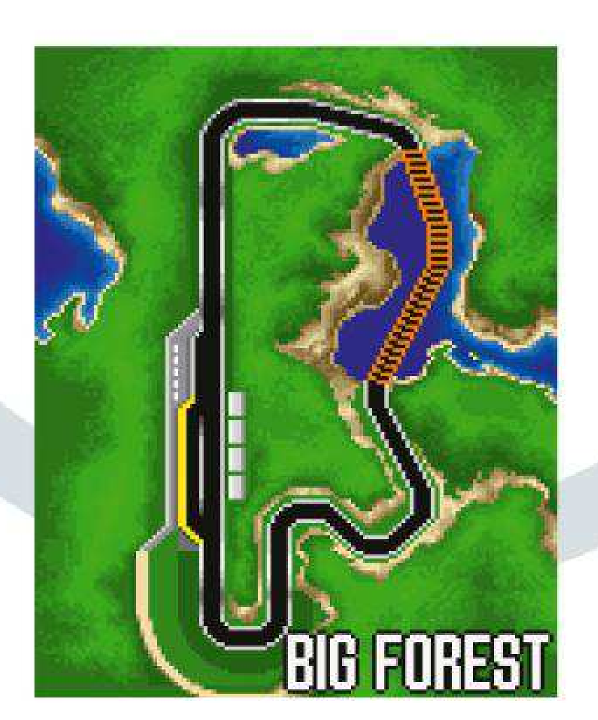
I was working under Yu Suzuki, the game director. We'd been working together a while by this point. He was a very energetic person and, well... a little childlike. He was full of curiosity, and when things didn't go his way, he would get very angry. But I understood that those things were just a result of his energy. If you didn't know him well, you might think he had a short temper. Once you got to know him, you came to respect it. I thought he was selfish, but realised that if I were in his shoes, I would be the same. I learned from him that it's important to believe in yourself.

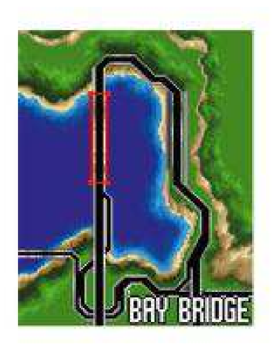
We decided early on we were developing the game in 3D, but when it came to the game itself, and what it would focus on in terms of originality... that was something we were talking about until the final phase of development. This is Suzuki-san's style: he creates the game while thinking about what it is going to be. His arcade games had no planning papers at all. We would do some basic study, and if he decided it was feasible, it'd become a project and we'd begin work on it. *Virtua Racing* is remembered for having multiple camera angles, which was something new at the time. That feature was only added towards the end of the project.

These days we have planning documents. Without them, the team doesn't know which direction to head in. But they're only a guideline. If we find something interesting that's not on the plan, we must have the courage to challenge ourselves and take a different path. It's in these moments that we make games more fun.



Nagoshi may not have agreed, but at the time *Virtua Racing* was a colossal step forward for videogame graphics technology. It was originally intended as a tech demo, only to be expanded into a full game when Sega realised what it had on its hands







DAYTONA USA

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade, Saturn **Release** 1993

This was my first game as director, but I was also a producer on it. It was a more advanced technology than we'd used for *Virtua Racing* [Sega's new Model 2 arcade board], so expectations were higher too. We were developing the chip with General Electrics; they had an office in California, so I went there. We didn't really talk about the chip very much – we were mainly talking about money – and I had a lot of time to kill. There was a NASCAR circuit nearby, and I could hear the noise from it. The people at GE were worried that I had so much spare time, and got me a ticket.



Daytona USA remains one of the best-selling coin-ops of all time, and the most lucrative sit-down cabinet ever. The series returned to Japanese arcades last year

It was really interesting. All the cars were really flashy, and even though they were just driving around an oval course over and over, people were enjoying it, having so much fun, a lot of energy. Maybe that's a cultural difference, but comparing it to Formula 1, at NASCAR you can see the cars the whole time. In F1, you're in your designated seat, the cars drive past in the blink of an eye and then you wait for the next lap. I thought it could become a game one day, maybe, but that was all.

The selling point of the Model 2 board was that we were able to make games more colourful, with better graphics – so I could make a game featuring those kinds of flashy cars. And personally I felt that, while driving games were selling well back then, in Japan they were all F1 games. ▶

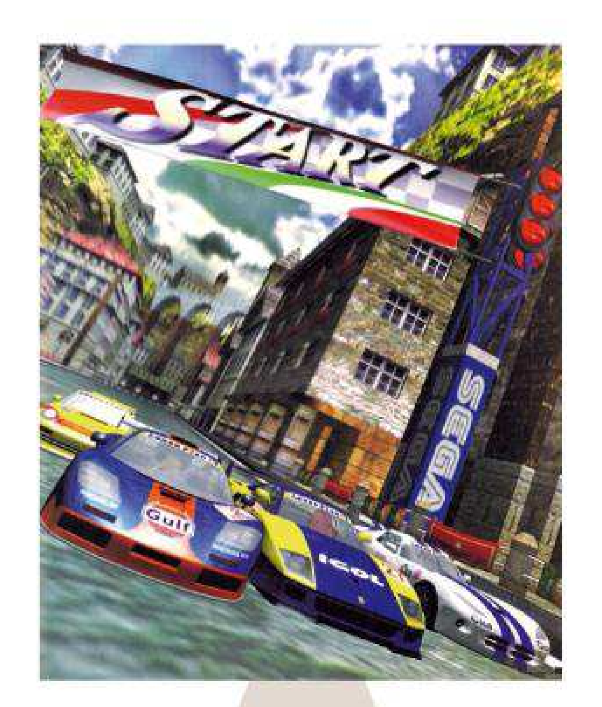


That was all we had. I didn't want to create the same games as other people; I wanted to do something different. I'm the same now. I am not the type of person to follow a trend.

This was a game about drifting, which is something both adults and children can enjoy, and we had a lot of female players too. Driving games were one of the biggest genres, with a big target market. We did a lot of testing, and made a lot of adjustments to make something we believed would be fun, but we were doing it for so long that we kind of got lost. Everyone had something they wanted to do, and we had too many ideas [laughs]. The scary thing about making driving games is that there are people that think an idea is great fun, but others don't agree at all. These aren't games of pure logic; they are something we feel, so they're very hard to make. We were told by various people that the game was too hard – that it would disappear from the market, players would walk away. But I thought the challenging difficulty was fun, and that if we made the game easier, it would just be the same kind of game everyone else was making. It was a gamble, but in the end it was up to me; I had to believe in myself. It was a huge seller worldwide.

I was the head of the team for the first time, and there were people on the staff – programmers, sound engineers, etc – doing things I had no experience of, so I wasn't sure how to communicate with them. I asked lots of people for advice, but concluded that everyone is different, and each individual has his own way. I was young back then, and I had more energy than I do now, so I spent a lot of time on people management. I just remember talking to people, constantly. In doing so they could see I was working really hard, and see my enthusiasm for the game.

I was being promoted much faster than anyone else. I was pleased to be valued, but at the same time, the faster I got promoted, the more senpai [older staff] became my subordinates. There were plenty of senpai on the team, but because I was working so hard on communication, their attitude towards me softened. I was talking so much that I did my work on the actual game after everyone had gone home, after midnight. I remember working right through to the morning.



Scud Race was the first game made for Sega's Model 3 board. Its title, which stands for Sport Car Ultimate Drive, was changed to *Sega Super GT* in the west

"WE WERE TOLD THAT THE GAME WAS TOO HARD, THAT IT WOULD DISAPPEAR FROM THE MARKET"









Scud Race has never appeared on a home console. Originally planned for Saturn before being moved to Dreamcast, development was eventually cancelled

It's a weird thing for me to say, maybe, but I always bore in mind the need to be humble. If people thought I was bossy, they wouldn't listen to me. These days, I have to be confident in my work, but when it comes to building relationships with people, there are no shortcuts. I don't think I've changed that much. I still tend to spend a lot of time with people.

SCUD RACE

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade **Release** 1996

We were using Model 3 for the first time, and graphics were becoming very realistic. I was a producer, and while I knew that the more resources we could allocate, the better the game would be, there had to be a limit. It was difficult to work out. I felt like a new era had begun. But at Sega we were using the most advanced technology available at the time, and we had pride in how the Sega brand was known for making good driving games. So we invested quite a lot of money in it.

As a result, in terms of success, *Scud Race* was just so-so. I was scolded for spending lots of money, and I was really stressed out because *Daytona* had been so successful. *Daytona* was really something exceptional; it wasn't something the company was expecting. But even though we made a profit on this game, I kept being told it was 'only half a *Daytona*', which really annoyed me [laughs].

After creating this game, I felt I'd done everything I could in the genre. I knew that both graphics and technologies would be better in the future, but I felt it was not something I wanted to continue doing. I wanted to graduate from creating driving games.

SHENMUE

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Dreamcast **Release** 1999

I was a supervisor on the team at first. As the project progressed, as you know, it had become bigger and bigger, and I couldn't put up with it any more. It was one of the turning points in my career. I talked to Yu Suzuki, as well as talking to my boss in the development division at ▶



Shenmue ran famously over schedule and budget, and played a major part in Sega's subsequent withdrawal from the hardware market. Both it and its sequel are being remastered for today's hardware while Suzuki works on *Shenmue III*

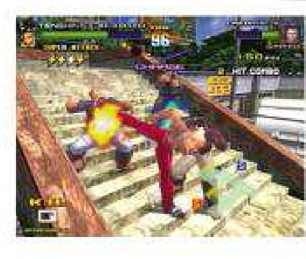
that time, and said I would like to have my own division. And they made it happen for me. But we really could not see the end of *Shenmue*, and I was called by our CEO at the time. He said to me, 'Please get this game finished' [laughs]. So I was a producer and director for the final months of the project.

I'd reviewed the whole project, looking at what kind of plan they had and the remaining workload. It took me more than a month to understand what was going on. The CEO asked me how much time would be needed, and I told him six months. Myself, and the programmer and designer I most trusted, called the whole team and told them we had to finish the game in six months. We did it, but it was a tough and bitter project for me [laughs].

Suzuki-san also knew he had to finish the game soon, whatever the final result. He's the kind of person that, if he wants to do more, cannot stop himself, so someone must be there to do it for him. Our CEO knew that I was the only person he would listen to. Hard as it was to be asked to do it, I knew why it had to be me [laughs].

There's only one reason for why the project turned into such a panic. Suzuki had been creating arcade games for so long, and didn't write planning documents. But for console games, you have to have a blueprint, and it was such a big project. He had a policy that we should not decide how a game should be on paper before we started making it. But we have to have guidelines, otherwise there's a risk that we overrun and fail as a company. Even if it was someone else's game, I learned the importance of that balance once again. I still think it was an epoch-making game at the time. If there had been a line producer or someone who was good at managing things, I believe the outcome would have been different.







You can see the seeds of the *Yakuza* games' combat system in *Spikeout*, though Nagoshi downplays the comparison and claims the game was more about Sega getting its head around cooperative multiplayer

SPIKEOUT: DIGITAL BATTLE ONLINE

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) **Format** Arcade **Release** 1998

At the time, console games didn't really have online play, but we knew it would be fun. We didn't think it was a near-future thing; we thought it was still far off. In the arcade, we'd been using network connections for driving games for a long time, but no one had tried to adopt this idea in any other genre. I wondered why we hadn't tried doing it for action games: we had already developed *Virtua Fighter*, so we had the knowhow, and we merged the two together, letting four players work together in a team.

The problem was, if four players worked together properly, they could play for hours with just a single ¥100 coin. So while the game sold really well, all the game-centre owners were really angry because they weren't making enough money from the game [laughs]. But what I heard was that, when the game was removed from arcades, players got upset. So there were fewer customers, and therefore less income overall. So arcade owners gave up on the idea of making money from the game, but kept it in to keep fans coming back. There are some arcades in Akihabara that still have the game today. But it's common sense in this business to balance fun and income. I admit I got it wrong this time.

SUPER MONKEY BALL

Developer Amusement Vision **Publisher** Sega
Format Arcade, GameCube **Release** 2001

When Sega left the hardware business after Dreamcast, everyone was really disappointed, because we'd lost the war. But I was very pleased about it, because it gave me an opportunity to provide software for other hardware. I felt free. And if we were going to be making games for other people, I wanted to work with what I had previously thought of as our biggest competitor. I visited Nintendo, obtained information about GameCube at an early stage, and told them I wanted to develop a game for them.

Super Monkey Ball was an arcade game before it was released for GameCube. Around that time, as I said earlier, graphics technology was getting better and better. Development costs were also higher, which became a big issue within Sega. Around that time our CEO kept changing, and the newest one asked me why making games cost so much money. I told him we couldn't do it any cheaper, but at the same time, I was quite upset about it. I decided to make a game with minimum resource, minimum time and minimum budget. It would be a game you would play with just a lever – no buttons. I just wanted to prove that it was possible.

Looking back, that's no way to work [laughs]. But there are some huge fans of this game. When we gave up on making hardware, we knew the GameCube was coming, and when it would be launched. We didn't think we had enough time to get a game ready for release day, but when I was asked if there was anything we could make, *Super Monkey Ball* came to mind. I think we had ten people on the team, maybe less. We made it just in time somehow.

F-ZERO GX

Developer Amusement Vision **Publisher** Sega
Format GameCube **Release** 2003

I was interested in how Nintendo created games. I wanted to work as a sub-contractor [with Nintendo as publisher] for this purpose, so I could see what kind of workflows and techniques they used. That's how the *F-Zero* project came about.

Compared to us, in the big picture, we are similar. But in the finer details – their decision-making and timing – things are different, and I learned a lot from them. In short, it's about objectivity. They value the consumer's point of view tremendously. And they are very, very thorough indeed. It's hard to describe, but when I'd say about some part of the game, 'It's okay like this, isn't it?' they'd say, 'Our company does not allow this kind of thing. Ever.' I didn't manage to change their minds about anything. Not even once. But that's why Nintendo has such a solid brand, even after all these years. That is why we lost the hardware war.

I really liked the Super Famicom game, and while we made a few proposals – *Metroid*, for instance, and others – I was most confident in making a driving game because of my experience in the genre, though I'd never made a sci-fi one. When we were having those meetings with Nintendo to decide what to make, Miyamoto was involved. He was like a god to me then, and it's the same today. If I was a musician who'd made a few hit records, he was The Beatles. Once the project was up and running he said to me, "You know how to do this. All you need to do is be confident, and just do it, without hesitation." I was really pleased about that. Once the project was up and running, he didn't get involved too much.

I was really motivated, and worked very hard. Even though we'd lost the war in the hardware market, I wanted Nintendo to see how great Sega was as a company. We made lots of characters and courses, and we did the best we could for the graphics using the best technology of the time.

Even though we'd tried really hard making games for Sega hardware, they never sold too well, but *F-Zero* sold over 1.5 million copies worldwide. We realised the only thing we needed to admit was that Sega did not have the ability to sell hardware [laughs]. That as a developer, we should not be sorry about losing the hardware business, or be worried about just being a software company – we did not need to be pessimistic at all. It was a good opportunity for me as I was able to ▶









Super Monkey Ball was designed in part to counter those who believed arcade games had grown too complex, but while it was accessible, it certainly wasn't an easy game. Expert level seven still gives us nightmares to this day

learn how Nintendo works, and as a software company it gave us our confidence back.

After it was released, I got a call from Nintendo. They said they wanted to see all the source code for the game, and wanted me to explain how we'd made that game, in that timeframe and with that budget, in detail. They were wondering how we'd done it – they couldn't figure it out. We were able to achieve something a lot higher than what Nintendo had expected.

YAKUZA

Developer/publisher Sega **Format** PS2 **Release** 2005

I feel like I've talked a lot about money today, but after PlayStation 2 was launched, the development costs of consumer games increased dramatically. And there was another paradigm shift in the market. Until the PS1 era, Japanese games in the western market were successful – within the top 20, say, around ten titles would be made in Japan. Maybe more. But that changed, and it became difficult for Japanese companies to compete with western games of high quality and big budgets, like those from EA, Activision or Rockstar Games.

Personally, I knew it would happen. After all, a company, located in the Kyoto countryside, that used to make hanafuda card games, happened to develop an electronic game, and dominated the world unexpectedly. That's why, initially, game development was centred in Japan. But as technology becomes more and more advanced, just like in music and movies, the destiny of an entertainment business is being absorbed by the US west coast [laughs]. I knew it would happen to the game business too.

All the Japanese developers were flustered. We all wanted to create something that would sell well, but if we wanted to do so, it would have to be sports, or military, or fantasy; they were limited to a few genres. And it would need to sell worldwide, and so had to release at the same time globally. So there were certain prerequisites there, and since everyone was thinking the same things, everyone was making similar games [laughs].



"I DIDN'T WANT TO CREATE A GAME WHERE THE CHARACTERS HAD NAMES LIKE JACK OR TOM"

But I thought it wasn't right to follow that direction. So, first, I abandoned the idea of selling worldwide. Next, I decided I wouldn't mind if female players didn't like the game; then that no children were allowed. When I decided all that, the only target left was the Japanese male.

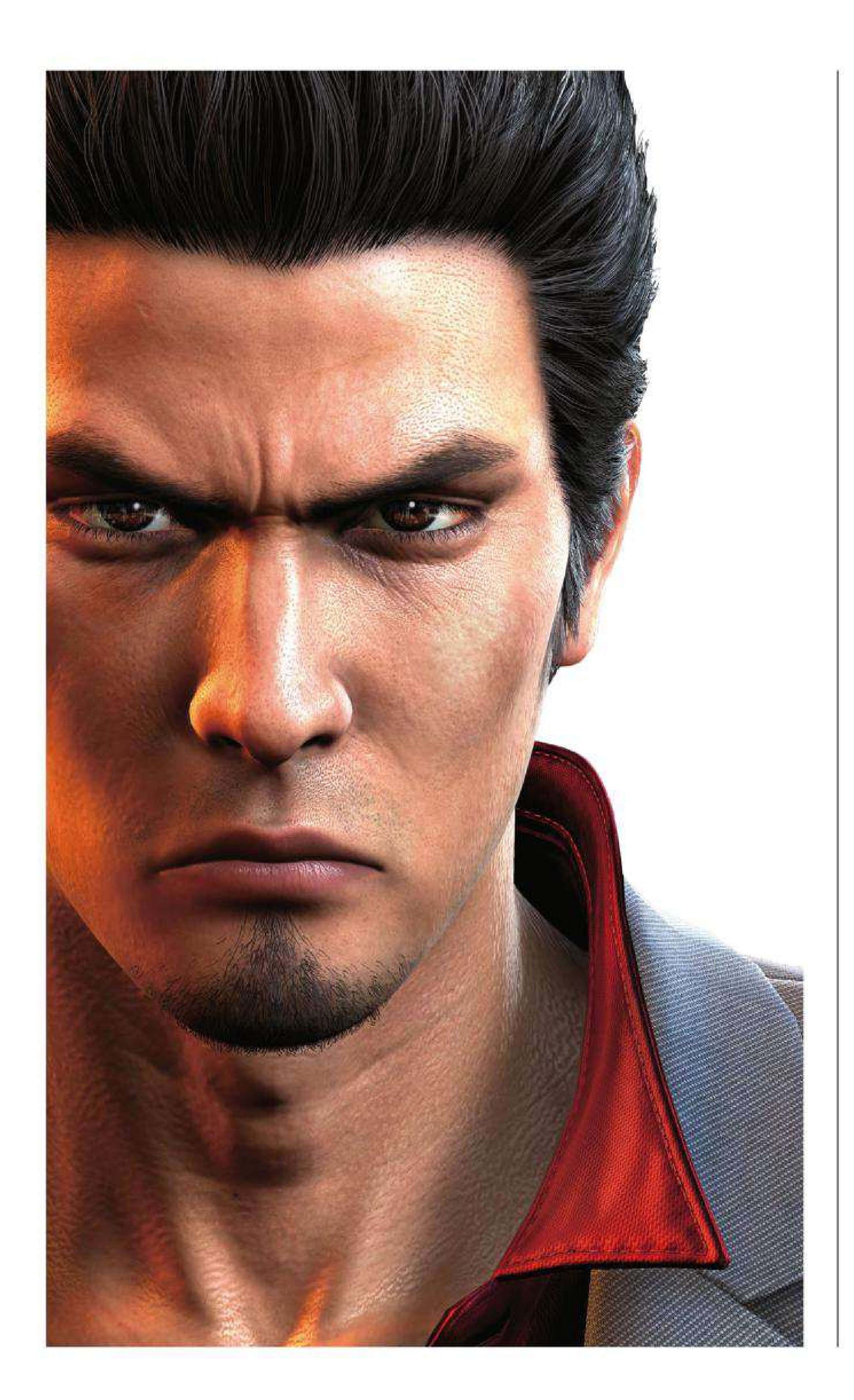
I didn't want to create a game where the characters had names like Jack or Tom. I wanted my character's name to be Kazuma Kiryu. Obviously that wouldn't be familiar to Americans, but it didn't matter, as I wasn't expecting them to buy the game. We'd been too focused on the worldwide market. There might be an argument about sales – the Japanese market was small – but I knew it would be successful if we got it right. And we did.

My bosses took some convincing. I did a presentation twice, and didn't get approval. I thought my third presentation would be another 'No', but there was another divine wind blowing toward me. Sega was struggling for cash and was very close to bankruptcy, so it merged with Sammy. As soon as it happened, I went in to see the new owner and presented the game to him, looking for his approval. Professionally, this was highly irregular and quite wrong. But I knew if the owner said 'yes', it would be good for the entire company. He asked me, "Do you really want to do this? Are you certain, and



Much was expected of *Yakuza* in the west, with Sega's localisation including a full English dub featuring Hollywood talent such as Michael Madsen and Eliza Dushku. Things didn't quite go to plan, and every release since has had Japanese audio





believe in yourself, that it will be successful?" I said, "Of course. If I'm wrong, you can do whatever you want with me." I got his approval, but our CEO was really mad about it [laughs]. He said it was unfair.

I've never said this before, but while we released this game with Sony, I'd done presentations about it to Microsoft and Nintendo. Back then they said, 'No, we don't want it'. Now they say, 'We want it!' [laughs] They didn't understand the reason why I created it.

I'm often asked how I did all the research, but it's Japanese culture – we have a lot of literature, comics, movies, tons of material we can refer to. But I did some of my own, yes. I like drinking; I also like women. I was having lots of fun in my life for a long time – whether to shake off my stress from work, or deepen the connection with my subordinates. I was, as they say in the west, a party-animal kind of person, and I learned a lot of interesting stories from the people I met. And some surprising stories, and some sad ones. They became elements of *Yakuza*'s story. The name Kiryu is one of them, and Mizuki [Sawamura], the first female core character, and other female characters' names were from ladies I used to date. I often do that in my games – I use the name of a person I liked or who looked after me well. I still do that today.

YAKUZA 6: THE SONG OF LIFE

Developer/publisher Sega **Format** PS4 **Release** 2016

I'm CCO now but, even in my current position, I am still very close to the director role. I create the plot by myself; if there are any parts of the scenario I want to change, I rewrite them myself at home. And I tell the staff to make adjustments I think are necessary. People tend to think that the higher your position becomes, especially when you're managing the business, the less hands-on they are with the product. I think the game industry is unique in this way. The CEO of an

automobile company, for instance, drives his company's cars. I'm sure the heads of music and movie companies go and see their artists and films. But the CEOs of videogame companies don't play games, they just manage the business. And I don't think that's right.

You should know what kind of products you're selling, what their good and weak points are. In the game industry, CEOs see only the promotion, just briefly, and do not actually play it. It takes time, yes, but I personally want to keep myself updated on the kinds of games Sega is developing. So I still play games, and I also want to know what the workflow of this generation is like, to ensure we still work efficiently. In order to see those things, I need to continue to participate in the process of making games. Otherwise, I can't say anything of value to my staff. That's my policy. I still work hard, though it's getting harder as I get older [laughs].

We said goodbye to Kazuma Kiryu in this game, and one of the reasons for that was that the style of the game had become predictable. The systems of the game, the game's worldview and main character – they are strongly associated with him. Kiryu is a cool guy, and I gave him as much freedom as I could, but still, there are certain limits and rules – 'Kiryu would never say that,' that kind of thing. It's okay to make minor adjustments here and there, but if we were to make a big change, the main fans would be unhappy, I think. But I want to make critical changes, which can only be possible with a new character. Some fans were disappointed, but at the same time there are lot of people who believe he will be back again in the future. If he ever returns, I want to do it with a surprise.

When I was making *Yakuza 5*, I told my bosses I could do one or two more games with Kiryu and that would be it. I wanted to do something new, and while there was a risk of losing current fans, if we continued making it over and over, it would be more and more predictable, which was also a risk. Anything that you start has to end someday. And if we were to end something, I wanted to do it when it was kind of at its peak.



Kamurocho, which is based on the Tokyo red-light district Kabukicho, has, like Kiryu, been a constant in the mainline *Yakuza* games. It will continue to be, too; Kiryu may be gone, but any pain will be sweetened somewhat by familiar surroundings

"IN THE GAME INDUSTRY, CEOS SEE ONLY THE PROMOTION, JUST BRIEFLY, AND DO NOT ACTUALLY PLAY IT"



New *Yakuza* protagonist Kasuga Ichiban is, in contrast to Kiryu's measured restraint, an impulsive hothead

RYU GA GOTOKU NEW PROJECT

Developer/publisher Sega **Format** TBA **Release** TBA

We already have a new *Yakuza* project, with a new character. It will be based in Japan, and as a human drama, it will be an interesting one. That part is the same as the previous games. But as for the game itself, we've reviewed a lot of the systems and so on. One of the original aims for the series was to tell a story of an underground society. It's an oriental outlaw's story, but it's really a human drama. I wanted to have a big impact in the opening moments, so we put the outlaw front and centre at the beginning of the game. If someone likes that kind of thing, they'd play and later realise that it was a human drama. On the other hand, if someone didn't like the beginning and didn't keep playing, they wouldn't see the real attraction of the game.

It will still be quite hardcore at the beginning, but I want to player to think, 'Oh, this game seems really interesting' – that's what I'm aiming for this time. That goes for the technology too, though I don't want to say much more as it would spoil the fun. By introducing a new and more current system, I'd like to increase the number of players. And if I do that, I can reintroduce Kiryu-san to some new fans. That would be ideal.

THE MAKING OF...



MARIO + RABBIDS: KINGDOM BATTLE

How a small team's passion convinced Nintendo to let chaos reign in the Mushroom Kingdom

By Chris Schilling

Format Switch
Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Milan, Paris)
Origin France, Italy
Release 2017

There is, even now, a note of disbelief in **Davide Soliani**'s voice. As he talks about the game that has consumed the last four years of his life, he can't stop referring to it as "a dream". Indeed, you sense the creative director of *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* is still pinching himself, having spent so much quality time lately with a bona fide videogame icon, a character who had been part of his life "even before he had a name". Yet it was in the N64 era where Soliani's love affair with Mario began in earnest. "I remember arriving at the videogame shop in Milan by motorcycle, dropping it on the floor without even caring about parking it, and then running inside and seeing Mario on screen in 3D for the very first time," he says. "Holding this strange controller, moving the analogue stick and seeing him moving accordingly on screen, it was crazy. I could never have imagined that one day I'd be able to work on a *Mario* title."

That opportunity was handed to him by producer **Xavier Manzanares**, who in 2013 was brand producer for Ubisoft's *Rabbids* series. "My goal was to think about the games ahead for the Rabbids," he tells us. "In the past, we'd had very good discussions about the party games we did with Nintendo, talking about ideas and things that could work or not, but we'd never really put something on the table." At the end of the year, he decided it was time to propose something new and different: a reboot of sorts for the *Rabbids* series. "We wanted to take a risk and make something that no one expected. So I contacted three creative directors working within Ubisoft at that time."

Soliani, of course, was one of the three. Manzanares's outline was fairly loose: it had to be a game that combined the Rabbids and Mario in some way, but beyond that, there were no rules. It was now February 2014, and Soliani and four colleagues cloistered themselves in a small room at Ubisoft's Milan studio, brainstorming ideas across a range of genres. "We eventually came up with a list of 13 different games, spanning from racing games to firstperson shooters, because for us it was an exercise to see how many ideas we could come up with around the concept of *Rabbids* and *Mario* together," Soliani explains. "One common point was to basically use the contrast between those two IPs to create a parody. We were basically trying to surprise ourselves."



***Kingdom Battle*'s hybrid of tactical combat and exploration was not easy to describe, so Soliani broke down the game's individual elements over a lengthy presentation to Nintendo**

Manzanares was certainly surprised by the result. "I was just waiting for a proposal, and had given them only a few weeks to do it," he recalls. But that wasn't Soliani's style. Instead, he sent Manzanares a huge mock poster, with fake screenshots and snippets of text. "We have it here – it's almost like something you would put in

"MIYAMOTO-SAN WAS NOT EXPECTING US TO SHOW A PROTOTYPE DIRECTLY, ESPECIALLY NOT A PLAYABLE ONE"

a museum," the producer smiles. "It was really weird as a proposal, but it was made with so much passion that I decided to stop working on the brand, refocus my attention on this game and start the adventure with Davide and his team."

If the idea of combining these two brands seemed unlikely, the notion that they'd join forces in a turn-based strategy game was even more fanciful. "OK, *Rabbids* and *Mario* might seem very far from each other," Soliani adds. "Well, for us it was the key. To use those differences to propose something completely new." But why a strategy game? "Because we wanted to propose something new in a genre, and do complex stuff in a very simple way," Soliani says. "Most tactical games are fun to play, but they look very sad in terms of their colour palette, and their complexity scares away players really easily."

Soliani and his team spent a lot of time discussing ways to make something that was deep yet accessible for all types of player. The defining moment came when the game's movement abilities – the dash move that lets players slide-tackle enemy units, and the team-jump that lets friendly units use one another as springboards to bounce over gaps and cover greater distances – were conceived. "Straight away, players could do complex stuff with a single click," Soliani says. In fact, when the time came to present the first prototype to Nintendo, it didn't look like a tactical game at all: the pitch showed the various techniques the player characters could perform, but with no HUD present, it wasn't immediately clear how the game would play. "They saw it almost as a sequential action game," Manzanares says.

Back then, *Kingdom Battle* was very different. The initial prototype was a real-time PvP-focused strategy game: the three-character setup was already established, but the player had a budget of time to move them all around the battlefield, controlling them directly rather than guiding them with a reticle as in the finished game. And each arena featured towers, which could be activated to expand the player's radius of vision.

Soliani and his team had taken great pains to prepare for that presentation. Keen to show they were taking their responsibilities seriously, they spent a lot of time carefully modelling, rigging and animating the Nintendo characters. "Miyamoto-san was not expecting us to show a prototype directly, especially not a playable one," Soliani grins. "He was probably expecting a discussion or a PowerPoint. But as a team we really wanted to show stuff instead of just talking." And Nintendo was suitably impressed. "They especially were not expecting us to recreate their own characters in our game to the point that they said, more than once, 'They look identical to ours!'" He laughs, proudly. "We told them we'd recreated them from scratch because we wanted to show that we respect those characters. I think that was the very moment we gained their trust."

Good job, too, since this unlikely crossover was proposing that Mario would no longer jump on his opponents to defeat them, but rather shoot them with guns. They were, Soliani confirms, there from the very first prototype. "Compared to what we have in-game today, they were more simple – even more toy-like," he says. And Nintendo was fine with that? "You learn

something working with Nintendo," he begins. "Nothing is taken for granted. You never know how they will react. And the second thing I learned is that you have to be bold. Worst case scenario, they'll tell you no. But they prefer you daring to propose stuff instead of being shy, that's for sure."

It took a little while for Manzanares and Soliani to reach the stage where they were more confident suggesting riskier ideas. The early stages of production were tricky, Manzanares says, because the scope of the game hadn't yet been fully defined. The development team was, after all, working on a game for a console that hadn't yet been revealed, and on an engine (Ubi's own Snowdrop) with which it wasn't yet fully familiar. But Nintendo's passion for the project proved encouraging, its insistence on wanting to be surprised motivating a change in approach. "We switched the focus of production, because they wanted to see Rabbid-ness to its full force," Manzanares laughs. "We thought most of what we would suggest would be killed, in respect to what *Mario* is." But as development progressed, discussions advanced to the stage where Nintendo would ask Ubisoft to push its weirder ideas even further. "Sometimes we got a 'no', but most of the time it was 'yes', and 'please continue'."

One example for which Soliani expected some pushback was the game's first boss, Rabbid Kong. If a character gets too close, Kong will grab them and use their face to scratch his backside. "When we called Nintendo to describe it, we said, we would like to do it, but if you want we only do it with the Rabbids characters. But they were laughing like hell, and they said, 'No no, please do it, even with our characters'," Soliani says. Another came with the third boss, The Phantom, a Rabbid opera singer who repeatedly mocks Mario in song. That, too, was happily waved through, and Soliani realised a common trend: "If they were laughing, it was basically an okay." Rabbid Peach, apparently, was a particular favourite at Nintendo.

Pushing the game's comedic elements to the fore inevitably meant a lot of work for the animation team, not to mention the range of possible variables on the battlefield. Animation director Marco Renso and his team had studied YouTube videos and past Nintendo games to try to recreate the characterisation of the Mushroom Kingdom heroes for those early demonstrations, but those references could only carry them so far. "A lot of the animations were very specific to our game and had to be validated by Nintendo afterwards, to be in line with how Mario would act, for example," Manzanares explains. "We had to create brand new sets of animations that would fit gun handling, the cover system, and even some cinematics and interactions with other characters."

In terms of raw quantity, for the combat alone, each character required more than 1,000 individual animations, covering moves from cover, sprints, dashes, and the team-jump. "On top of that, we put in a lot of effort in terms of defining or building upon the psychology of the characters," Soliani says. It was a huge effort, but the hard work of Renso and his team was rewarded with an unexpected endorsement. "The guys at Nintendo said they were going to show the cinematics to the *Mario* team because they were really, really nice, so that was a great honour."

Kingdom Battle's interface was perhaps more challenging still to refine: it evolved over "many, many playtests" and iterations, Soliani admits. At first, the combat used a fairly traditional strategy-game system for aiming accuracy, basing the percentage on a variety of factors ranging from distance to the type of cover, including modifiers for flanking, high and low ground and more. It was, he says, far too complex: the game had the depth it needed, but not the accessibility.

Eventually, the team settled on a more easily understandable set of rules, whereby line of sight would remain a factor, but certain cover types would offer a straight 50/50 chance of getting hit or not. If a certain amount of *Rabbid*-ness was required, the team realised there was such a thing as too much chaos. "We even had the concept of fumble at one time, where you could fumble your weapon and break it," Manzanares explains. "We felt it was funny. But it was not funny to play." Yet as the game entered its final stages, Soliani felt something was missing – and skill trees for each character were hurriedly added. "We needed to support a wider range of playstyles," he says. "It was so huge that it affected everything within the combat system, because from that moment on players could spend points improving their movement or attacking abilities." He laughs quietly, acknowledging his colleague. "A big thank you to Xavier for approving it."

Then came the leaks, the game's grand unveiling spoiled three weeks ahead of schedule. "Even when you know that this can potentially happen, seeing your game discussed and presented in a way that doesn't represent everything you've being doing for so long is not something everybody can just deal with," Manzanares says. But with E3 around the corner, a speech already prepared, and work on a playable demo keeping everyone busy, there was a feeling of immense pride at the studio. "We couldn't wait to go there, just to show to everyone that this was not just a crossover, a business deal, but something that came from our hearts," he tells us. And, as the camera cut from a typically ebullient Miyamoto to an overwhelmed Soliani in the crowd at LA's Orpheum Theatre, the world suddenly understood how true that was. ■

Q&A

Davide Soliani
Creative director, Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle

Grant Kirkhope's soundtrack is a key feature. Did you involve him because of his ties with Nintendo from his Rare days?



Basically it was because we grew up playing Nintendo 64 games – we all loved *Donkey Kong 64*, *GoldenEye*, *Banjo Kazooie* – that we thought about having Grant on board. From a creative point of view, what I wanted from Grant was to create a fable. I wanted the player to believe that these beautiful worlds were alive and kicking, and also wanted to trigger a little bit of nostalgia for the golden age of videogames. At the beginning of the project, I was a little bit shy with him because for me he was a legend – so important that I was afraid of sending comment. But it's so easy to work with him that after a month-and-a-half we were already bickering [laughs].

How did you pitch the Donkey Kong Adventure DLC to Nintendo?

We worked on the idea of proposing the use of *Donkey Kong* to Nintendo when we presented *Kingdom Battle* for the very first time. But I couldn't just go there and say, 'We would like to do DLC with *Donkey Kong*'. You have to show them why you are willing to use *DK*; you need to show them the benefit to the players. As soon as we went back we started to work on how this character was going to be a game-changer for the combat system; we said we should break the rules of the first game. To the point that the programming team was panicking because it meant rewriting everything from scratch. But we were so convinced by the idea, and that's why I think some players said it feels almost like a sequel. At the beginning, we were aiming for three or four hours, but, well, we got carried away [laughs].







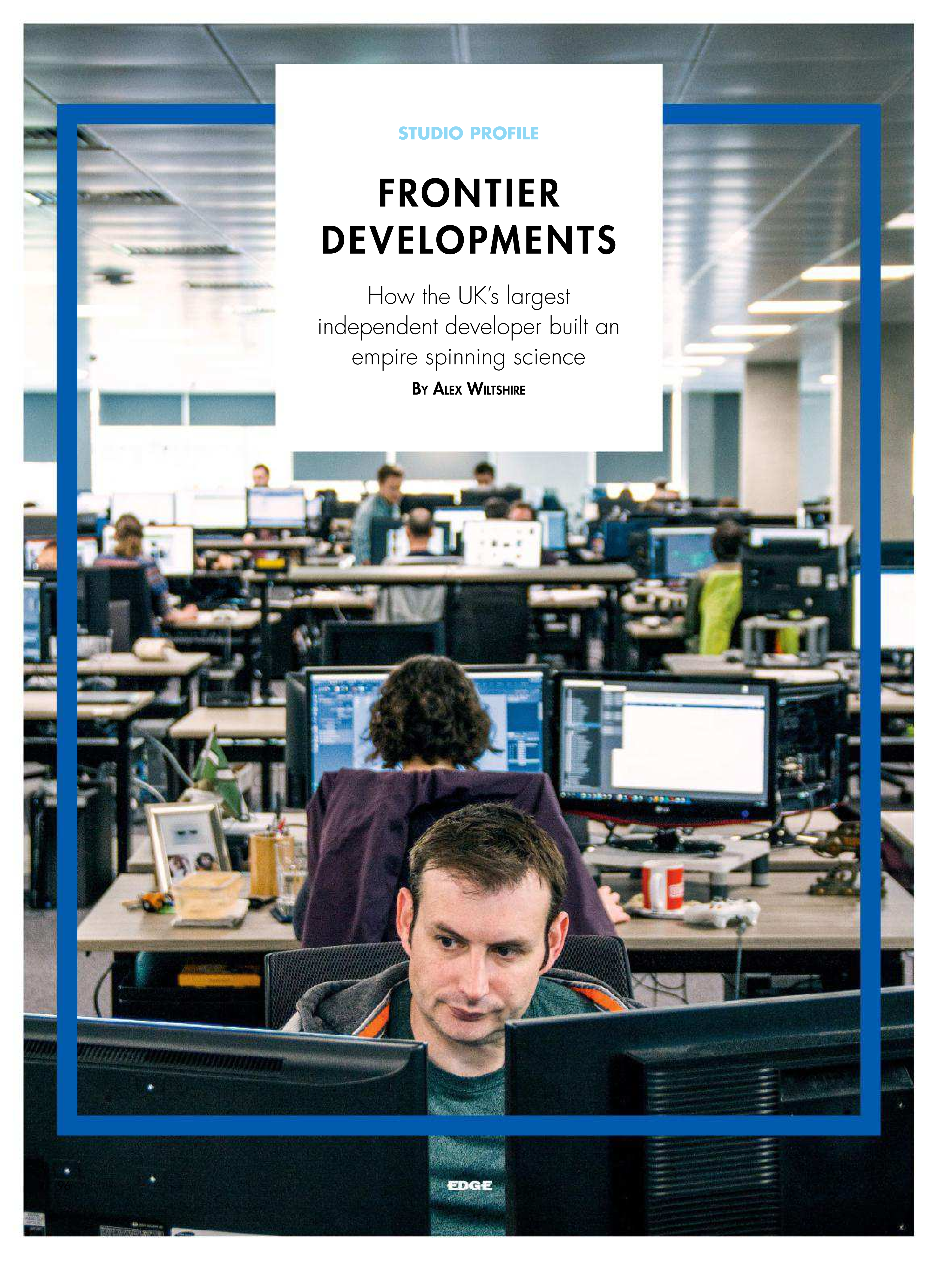








1 An early environment test before Mushroom Kingdom furniture was added. Soliani: "The most basic element of the *Mario* games is the brick block and that became the ideal excuse to create a means to hide yourself. It's also perfect because the texture of the cube reminds you of something that can take damage." 2 The *Kingdom Battle* team. "I remember when I went on stage to announce the game, I could see the question marks over people's heads," Manzanares says. "But I also felt all the passion from the team in Paris and Milan about the project. It was stressful, but then I saw the surprise of people looking at the screen and thinking, 'Hey, this looks really cool!'" 4 Audio art director Romain Brillaud worked with composer Grant Kirkhope to create the various musical props. Soliani: "I remember Miyamoto-san calling us, saying 'If possible, I would like you guys to come up with a new pipe sound'. Grant was panicking because the original pipe sound is so iconic! But if Miyamoto-san has a proposition, you cannot say no." 5 Nintendo was keen for Ubisoft to emphasise the differences between its characters and the Mushroom Kingdom heroes. "They're avid fans of animation," Manzanares says. "With Rabbid Kong, The Phantom and Rabbid Peach in particular, we really showed what we were capable of"



STUDIO PROFILE

FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS

How the UK's largest independent developer built an empire spinning science

BY ALEX WILTSHIRE

David **Braben** says that *Elite Dangerous* tells one big lie, the lie that faster than light travel is possible. "When you start looking at the equations, how on Earth can something as fragile as a human not get ripped to shreds by the process of going through hyperspace? But hyperspace isn't ruled out by physics!" he quickly adds, revealing his discomfort with the fact that *Elite Dangerous* has to interfere with the veracity of its 1:1 recreation of the Milky Way, which was closely based on the latest astronomical data and modelling when it was being made. But it had to function as a game, even if Braben wanted to complete the dream he started to realise on a BBC Micro in the form of 1984's original *Elite*. After all, what use is a galaxy of stars and planets if travelling to even the very closest takes literal years?

If there's one shared quality to the genre- and audience-crossing breadth of Frontier Developments' games, it's that they strive for authenticity. *Disneyland Adventures*? You get to explore an accurate rendition of the real place. *Planet Coaster*? Its physics are accurate enough that Steel Vengeance, the tallest, fastest, steepest and longest wood-and-steel rollercoaster in the world, was debuted in the game before it was opened to the public in May. "It was magic to stand in front of this real coaster and to play video of it in the game," creative director **Jonny Watts** recalls.

"The wind resistance has to be spot-on to match," Braben says.

"The lie in *Planet Coaster* is that it doesn't have health-and-safety rules," Watts adds.

Even in *Jurassic World Evolution*, Frontier's latest release, the team had to lean on the fiction of the Jurassic Park universe to provide the instant recognition it needed, but also filled in the many blanks that the films don't show – the full sweep of daily dinosaur behaviour and the way they move, their sounds and the details of their appearances – from recent paleontological research.

Put it this way: if you went to Frontier Expo last year you'd have heard astrobiologist William Baines talking about xenobiology, palaeontologist Jack Horner (who inspired Dr Alan Grant, Sam Neill's character in Jurassic Park) talking about dinosaurs, and aeronautical engineer and self-styled 'thrillologist' Brendan Walker about the psychology behind rollercoaster design. Authenticity forms the backbone of Frontier's games, granting them depth, credibility and coherence. But there's something else to it, too. "Just imagine if people play *Jurassic World*




Frontier CEO David Braben (left) was appointed OBE in 2014. CCO Jonny Watts began his career at Sensible Software

Evolution and some of them are stimulated to study dinosaurs," Watts says.

"It's funny, people have got into programming, into science, because as a child they were interested in *Elite*," says Braben, who is also one of the co-founders of the Raspberry Pi Foundation, which aims to promote computer science to children. "It used be *Elite* that came up often, but now it's [*Elite* sequel] *Frontier*." Indeed, many of Frontier Developments' senior staff have been working there for a decade or more, having grown up with *Elite* and its first sequel, *Frontier: Elite II*. Some of them, such as *Elite Dangerous* producer Adam Woods, who had a pirated copy of *Frontier* on his Amiga, now get to work on it.

Frontier Developments is about to celebrate its 25th anniversary. When we visit, it has amassed 370 staff and has just moved into a new office in its Cambridge science park, having outgrown its previous one. One floor leading off its multi-level glass atrium is, intriguingly, still empty. On a floor upstairs, one side of the office houses the *Elite Dangerous* team, which is still supporting a game that's now coming up to four years since its full release with new ships, features and things to find across the galaxy. The team that made the recent *Jurassic World Evolution*, meanwhile, occupies another half of a floor. Elsewhere, members of the *Planet Coaster* team have moved to dinosaur-park management, but many remain to continue to produce content packs. There's another big space for Frontier's publishing team, and finally, half a floor is given to a mysterious new project.

FRONTIER™

Founded 1994
Employees 370
Key staff David Braben (CEO), David Walsh (chief operations officer), Jonny Watts (creative director)
URL www.frontier.co.uk
Selected softography *Dog's Life, RollerCoaster Tycoon 3, Thrillville, LostWinds, Kinectimals*
Current projects *Elite Dangerous, Planet Coaster, Jurassic World Evolution*

This thoroughly multi-game studio is the UK's largest independent developer, a studio which has been self-publishing since the release of *Elite Dangerous* in 2014. To a large extent, this shift has been enabled by modern-day internet-driven movements such as Kickstarter, on which *Elite Dangerous* earned £1.5 million in January 2013, digital marketplaces such as Steam, and social-media networks. But you can trace a spirit of independence right through Braben's career, from when he attempted to find a publisher for *Elite* with co-creator Ian Bell. He remembers taking it to a meeting with Thorn EMI, only to hear its seasoned publishing team question the appeal of entirely open-ended play and criticising it not for granting its players lives like every other game of its generation. "They liked it technically, but they said it didn't work as a game," he says, but he and Bell stuck completely to all their ideas. The rest is history.

Fast forward to *Frontier: Elite II*, and Braben managed to get a publishing deal with Konami only to find it selling it to another company called GameTek, which went bankrupt a few years later. *V2000*, a version of *Virus* for PlayStation and PC, was published by Grolier, which wasn't a large enough outfit to reliably secure shelf-space to actually sell it. And Frontier itself has skirted dangerously close to becoming a work-for-hire studio over its history, making Wallace And Gromit tie-in games and entering into a three-game relationship with Microsoft to make games for Kinect, including launch title *Kinectimals* and *Disneyland Adventures*. One big attempt to break out of that cycle was *The Outsider*, an ambitious open-world adventure game for PS3 and 360. ▶

"PEOPLE HAVE GOT INTO PROGRAMMING, INTO SCIENCE, BECAUSE AS A KID THEY WERE INTERESTED IN ELITE"





Frontier's new office is in the same science park as its old one. Each project has a dedicated area with senior team members sitting in the middle, such as *Elite*'s Sandy Sammarco (left). When we visit, CCO Jonny Watts' desk is with *Jurassic* team, despite having an office upstairs

Originally signed by Codemasters, which eventually dropped it, *The Outsider* was in development for six years, and its cancellation led to redundancies.

What instead led the studio out of the woods was a significantly smaller game. Conceived by designer Steven Burgess and released on WiiWare in 2008, *LostWinds* was a simple and gently artful platformer which used Wii Remote-powered gesture controls, and it was an important experiment for the studio. "It was about validating processes as well as making something experimental," Braben says. *LostWinds* was about learning to work with platform holders directly, about producing screenshots and trailers and working with the press – about doing all the things that publishers traditionally do. And *LostWinds*, which was necessarily a small game because it had to fit into WiiWare's 40mb file limit, was small enough that it wouldn't be a risk to the company. "It's a beautiful game. I'm very proud of it," Watts says. And it meant Microsoft was the last publisher Frontier worked for.

"Our reputation at Microsoft was very good, though," Watts says. "We finished the games we were signed up to do, it was super-professional, and the split was very cordial."

"We've still got a great relationship with them," Braben adds.

"And it wasn't about financial necessity," Watts continues. "We just wanted to make the games we wanted to make, rather than what someone else wanted us to."

"It's a combination of creative freedom for the teams and the fact that we can plan much longer term," Braben says. "When you're working with external publishers, the technologies don't necessarily flow from one to another and there's a danger of getting pigeonholed. Plus, it frustrated me that we didn't participate in the success. In the 36 years I've been in this, the biggest risk wasn't not performing, but in publishers going away. We've had that several times over that period. Publishing puts us in much more control of own destiny and with more ability to go with our gut feel on things, to do our own statistics and do low-risk projects that are actually more innovative."

Frontier's games are, after all, ambitious. *Disneyland Adventures* reconstructed Disneyland on an Xbox 360 and used Kinect; it demanded that the studio navigate a storm of licensing signoffs, and it still completed it within a year. *Elite Dangerous* reconstructed the Milky Way. But underpinning all of them is the same in-house engine, Cobra, which brings such efficiencies as allowing technical advances made for one game to be incorporated into the next.

"WE DON'T MAKE LITTLE GAMES, WE MAKE MASSIVE ONES THAT DRILL DOWN INTO THE CORE AND EXPAND ON IT"

So, for example, the IK solutions developed to allow *Jurassic World Evolution*'s dinosaurs to credibly tread their enclosures (and visitors) will go into Frontier's next games. And it's very flexible, able to span *Elite*'s multiplayer galaxy, govern thousands of on-screen park visitors, and allow *Planet Coaster* players to construct huge convoluted rides out of tiny components.

So far, all three of its self-published games have been big-budget projects, and Frontier has given each long-term support. Watts says "never say never" to the idea of Frontier making smaller-scale games, but there's a sense at the studio that it operates best at the end that sustains the kind of meaty technical challenges that grab headlines and satisfy big-studio developers. "We don't make little games, we make massive ones that really drill down into the core and expand on it," says **John Laws**, who's been art director at Frontier since the early 2000s. "And then we won't stop. We want to build up a solid and cohesive world."

Still, Watts describes the scale of its games as 'triple-I'. "I was once seriously shouted down for saying we're indie!" Braben says, mock-affronted. "It's different when you're big, but we're independent. I don't think you need to be living off beans on toast to have the indie vibe." That might be true, but it's still difficult to buy Frontier as an indie, especially as it's starting to publish external games. It hasn't any titles to announce yet, but in part the idea is to gain experience in publishing other studios' games to further refine its processes, and perhaps also help to support UK talent. "We want to publish high-quality games," Braben says. Watts adds: "We want them to be remembered not just for their quality, but as games people will keep revisiting and engage with on emotional level."

If Frontier finds them, those games in many ways would mirror its own. Though it's always prided itself on its scientific accuracy and technical expertise, it's easy to forget that Frontier's games are also laced with odd charm and wit. "There's always been an eccentricity to what we do," says Laws. "Charm and appeal. We've always embraced diversity as a company, and we like to surprise people. We like a technical challenge, but we want people to approach a game, think they know what they'll get and always get some nice eccentric thing which they can latch on to, a hook." ■



❶ *Thrillville* saw Frontier bring park simulators to consoles.
❷ *Jurassic World: Evolution* features Hollywood-level realism.
❸ *Dog's Life, a* PS2 title, was played from dogs' perspectives.
❹ *LostWinds*' Toku plays with WiiMote-powered wind magic.
❺ Ships continue to be added to *Elite Dangerous* today.
❻ *Planet Coaster*'s art style nails cartoonish charm



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker Switch
Nintendo's pint-sized adventurer and his compact stages are a snug fit for Switch, particularly in handheld mode: the original's forced tilt controls are absent, thankfully, and the hakoniwa-style levels look brighter and crisper than they ever did on the GamePad. An omnipresent cursor in docked mode is annoying, but the Odyssey-themed courses are this re-release's only real disappointment. Not because they're bad – quite the opposite – but because Nintendo has only included a miserly four.

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle Switch
This is immaculate DLC making, expanding on the base game's mechanics while simultaneously turning them on their head. Donkey Kong is a revelation in this generous, ten-hour expansion, his ability to pick up and throw objects – including not just scenery, but enemies and allies too – completely changing the way you think about the battle before you. A triumph.

Destiny 2 PS4
Okay, now we're getting somewhere. The surprise Whisper Of The Worm quest, which appeared in *Destiny 2* one weekend, leads players to a sniper rifle of near game-breaking power, a gun that trivialises most of the content in the game. It's precisely the sort of thing Bungie was trying to avoid in *Destiny 2* – and exactly the sort of thing the game was crying out for. Roll on Forsaken.



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

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Switch

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PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

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PC, PS4, Xbox One

Play it again

For years now, publishers have obsessed over how to keep the disc in your tray and off your trade-in pile, expanding and tinkering with their games long after release in the hope that you'll stick around forever. That, however, is a difficult thing to get right, and a very expensive business. A far more cost-effective solution, as this month's Play crop proves, is to simply dump you back at the start of the game as often as humanly possible.

In the old days, this was simply how things worked. You got as far as your skills could take you, then when you ran out of lives or credits, you had to start over. We see this ethos in *Dead Cells* (p112), a game that makes clear its Roguelike structure within seconds – first by showing you a room full of empty glass jars to be filled with gear that will persist across playthroughs, and then by having one of its nails-hard enemies kill you really, really quickly.



The Persistence (p116) is a little more subtle about it, if only because it's played in VR, where few games to date have been designed with replay value in mind. Yet once the development community spends some time with this frightful sci-fi Roguelike, we expect things may change. Then there's *Hollow Knight* (p114), a game we missed on PC but whose Switch re-release has proven so intoxicating that we had to find space for it here to justify all the late nights it's caused. While not a Roguelike, it takes from *Dark Souls* a penchant for severely punishing your mistakes. We already know its dark, mysterious corners like the backs of our hands.

Needless to say, it's not always an effective solution. *Octopath Traveler*'s (p104) hook is that it tells eight stories, yet if you want to see them all, you'll have to play through pretty much the same game eight times. It's to the game's great credit that it just about gets away with it.

Octopath Traveler

Developer Acquire
Publisher Square Enix
Format Switch
Release Out now

Each of *Octopath Traveler*'s eight playable characters seems, in some way, to reflect the JRPG maker's dilemma. They're either caught between the comforts of home and the allure of what lies beyond, or otherwise held captive by their past. Take happy-go-lucky merchant Tressa, blissfully content in her idyllic coastal village before a chance encounter encourages her to seek her fortune outside its boundaries. Or Olberic, a nomadic mercenary, who has finally found a place to settle down, until an echo of his former life sets him back on the road again. Then there's dancer Primrose, demeaning herself for an abusive boss to track down the tattooed men responsible for her father's death. It's not hard to see something of the game's creators in these tales, since *Octopath Traveler* seems similarly torn, unwilling – or perhaps unable – to fully break with the traditions of its genre, while at the same time demonstrably keen to stride forward into the unknown.

Nowhere is that tension between old and new more clearly expressed than the game's instantly eye-catching art style, a captivating fusion of classical sprites and contemporary effects. Smart use of light and shadow, shallow focus and bokeh – from shimmering seas to twinkling snowscapes – helps transform 2D worlds into tactile, three-dimensional dioramas. There is something strangely hypnotic about watching realistic-looking waves gently lapping against a pixelated pier, and the unorthodox presentation benefits exploration, too. Hidden routes are properly hidden, in the sense that they're often physically obscured: your party will disappear behind scenery, usually reemerging to find a treasure chest containing something valuable at the end of the path. As a result, a comparatively small world comes to feel much bigger, while sharp-eyed and thorough players are frequently rewarded.

Your journey is sporadically punctuated by random encounters with a roll call of monsters ranging from crabs to serpents and bandits to birdmen – though the threat level remains pleasantly parochial throughout. There are no world-ending threats nor megalomaniacal villains; rather, there's a focus on a relatively mundane brand of evil, with various men (and in one particularly memorable case, women) exploiting the poor and the fearful for their own personal gains. If the episodic nature of the storytelling means they're ultimately a little thinly sketched, you're at least given plenty of motivation to wipe the smile off their faces. And their monstrousness is reflected in their size when you face them in battle: your chibi-style heroes remain small, while they grow substantially in stature, their huge, characterful sprites towering ominously over you.

These extended skirmishes are the strongest showcase of a terrific combat system that similarly finds fresh ways to explore familiar concepts. It's reminiscent of the *Shin Megami Tensei* games' Press Turn mechanic, in the sense that it's about finding, and exploiting, an enemy's vulnerabilities, whether they be elemental or physical, to break them: deplete an enemy's shield points and you'll not only stop them from attacking, but leave them defenceless for a turn. This is combined with an idea that owes a debt to *Bravely Default* and its sequel: you can store attacks for future turns, increasing their potency significantly the longer you wait before unleashing them. As such, you can steadily chisel down an opponent's defences, soaking up the odd hit for the opportunity to unload a devastating flurry of stabs or a violent volley of lightning. Or you might prefer to break them down quickly, giving yourself a chance to recover and prepare for when they're ready to take their next turn, perhaps weakening them with curses (the usual suspects: poison, confusion, blindness) in the meantime.

The extended skirmishes are the strongest showcase of a terrific combat system



Underlings complicate matters further: some can launch attacks that target your entire team, others causing individual afflictions that you'll waste valuable turns trying to fix. Sometimes you'll merely need to fend them off before they can do any real damage, while others must be removed entirely before you can break down their master's shield. In truth, some of these battles drag on a little too long: you'll often have figured out an effective strategy within the first few minutes, and for the remainder you're joylessly chipping away until they finally fall. And though the random battles in the lead-up are by no means trivially simple, there's quite a leap between those encounters and the bosses, with no mid-level opponents to fill the gap. Their weaknesses, too, are often very different from the guardian you'll face at a dungeon's end – and so sometimes you'll find yourself either struggling en route to a boss you finish off easily, or breezing through until you suddenly hit a brick wall.

Characters can, however, assume alternative jobs to cover for any eventuality – at least once you've found the location of the accompanying shrine in the wild. Our party's healer benefits from the attacking options of a scholar, letting her alternate between dealing damage and healing it. Similarly, our hunter becomes a thief, stealing SP to pay for her more powerful physical attacks. Even so, a glance at your opponent's ludicrous health pool can prove faintly depressing. It does at least ensure you can't simply stock up on dozens of items to brute force your way through a battle; rather, you're incentivised to come up with efficient combinations. But then JRPGs have always tended to allow players the option between a sledgehammer approach to progress and more thoughtful, technical play.

There's plenty of grinding either way, in truth, since the four characters you've left out of your party don't level up away from the action, and as a result it takes time to get them back up to speed, with the main ▶





ABOVE As in *Bravely Default*, it pays to switch secondary jobs reasonably regularly, combining valuable perks from each. It also certainly helps to have SP and HP recovery skills when you face the late-game bosses





MAIN *Octopath Traveler*'s collection of non-playable characters are usually worth talking to, with some offering valuable hints and tips – including the occasional battle strategy, though sadly none can speed it up for you. **ABOVE** Each character's story has four chapters, culminating in a tough final encounter. Yet they're not the hardest test: a difficult post-game dungeon awaits the most dedicated players. **LEFT** A weakness to spears and arrows is a godsend, since warriors and hunters respectively have abilities that can land multiple hits on a single turn. It pays to boost your accuracy first, mind: a hail of arrows usually misses at least as many targets as it hits

When there's a path off to one side, you can just about guarantee there'll be some loot at the end of it. It's worth keeping Therion in your party where possible, since he's the only one who can open purple chests

protagonist always several levels ahead since they can't be removed from the party. A quick jaunt through more dangerous territory – each new area comes with its own suggested level – can get them in fighting shape, though you'll have to nanny them through, with enemies liable to targeting weaker links. After a while, you'll find you're able to carry one character, but no more; otherwise, in a game that promises to let you tell your own story, you don't have much option but to keep chopping and changing your party. Unless, that is, you opt to focus exclusively on four stories rather than eight. But then the level gating for later chapters of each individual story all but determines where you'll go next. You're never exactly forced to approach it a particular way, but it's clear Acquire would rather you see everyone's story play out in its entirety.

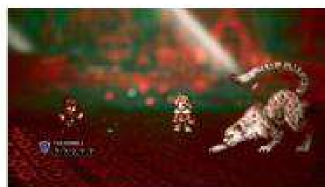
Not that you'll mind too much. This is a charmingly varied cast, and their self-contained narratives, though rarely crossing over with one another, are often well-told. The olde-worlde language used throughout by hunter H'aanit is sure to be something of an acquired taste; likewise the game's mile-wide sentimental streak. Still, composer Yasunori Nishiki's splendid score approaches the heartfelt highs of Nobuo Uematsu's work, while his jovial village themes and lively battle music bear plenty of repetition.

And *Octopath Traveler* is quite unconcerned with repeating itself, often sending you back to old haunts, albeit with a different character from your first visit. It's an opportunity to mop up any side-quests you might have put off – and if you have, it's probably because their solutions can be frustratingly opaque. It's here that the game's 'path action' system comes into play, inviting you to use an individual character's special ability to influence others. You might need to reunite two NPCs, for example, using Ophilia's Guide or Primrose's Allure skill to have them accompany you. When someone's stubbornly obstructing a door, you can Challenge them to a duel with Olberic or have H'aanit Provoke them into battle. Apothecary Alywn can Inquire for info to earn discounts at the inn or unlock fresh stock at the weapon shop; foppish scholar Cyrus can Scrutinise villagers with similar results.

That each ability essentially has two variants highlights the limitations of what is a fairly shallow idea, and yet proves handy in that you'll usually have the option you need to finish a quest without having to head to the tavern to change your party setup. Yet if this suggests the makers have player convenience in mind it's inconsistently implemented. You can quickly optimise a character's gear, for example, yet there's no way to access anything equipped by anyone you've benched; you'll have to get into the habit of stripping them bare when you swap them out.

That might seem picky, but it epitomises a game that too often falls back on outmoded systems – which, after the intelligent modernisations of Square's *Bravely Default*, is all the more surprising. For better and worse, *Octopath Traveler* manages to evoke the games its creators grew up with, without ever quite matching the profusion of new ideas that made them so beloved in the first place. There's still much to enjoy here, but if Acquire had shared the courage of its protagonists' convictions, this could have been a journey worth making eight times over.

7



HIT PAWS

If four characters aren't enough, you can temporarily make a party of five. Ophilia's Guide and Primrose's Allure abilities allow you to recruit NPCs: shop around and you'll find some pretty handy fighters, though you can't direct them once summoned. Tressa, meanwhile, can hire help in a pinch: it's expensive, but sometimes worthwhile if you're on the back foot. Better is H'aanit's ability to call upon beasts she's snared during battle. You'll need to weaken them first before throwing a net over them, and even so the capture rate for the best ones is low. But pick well and you've got several powerful options against bosses. And when they run off, her pet leopard Linde can still launch the equivalent of a sword or polearm attack.

Post Script

Why Octopath Traveler's unorthodox storytelling is both its making and undoing

Our *Octopath* adventure begins with Tressa, a wide-eyed and improbably wholesome young woman, who sees a noble calling in her role as a merchant. "A good merchant," she explains, "should understand what their customer needs and sell them what's best!" She's naive and optimistic in the great JRPG tradition, and yet she isn't blessed with any special power, nor is she forced to deal with any potential world-obliterating danger. Her first quest sees her recover stolen goods from some thieving pirates with the help of a sleeping draught and some wine. True, hers is a coming-of-age tale of sorts, but she's anything but your archetypal JRPG protagonist.

Likewise, Alfyn, the fourth recruit to our party. He's a poor, unkempt but kindly apothecary, seeking nothing more than the opportunity to hone his craft and help others outside his village home. In fact, whichever character you choose as your lead, *Octopath Traveler*'s early moments seem keen to buck genre convention, or at least apply some kind of twist to familiar ideas. Primrose's quest might be motivated by pure-and-simple revenge, but her story involves a thoughtful examination of the exploitation of women by powerful men: the kind of subject matter you wouldn't ordinarily expect from this kind of game.

This, by itself, is refreshing: it's unusual to play a JRPG where the stakes feel relatively low in global terms, but deeply personal to each individual. It's rare to find a cast with such wildly different motivations, let alone one that allows you to follow several smaller stories at once. And yet after the third or fourth of these tales, you'll begin to realise why it's not normally done this way. When a player's journey can begin in any of eight places, it's vital that the approach remains consistent. As such, by the time you've recruited your eighth and final character, you'll begin to feel as if you're going through the motions somewhat. The setup might be different, but the process is all but identical: introduction, explore town, field phase, dungeon, boss, return. And repeat.

Still, the game's marketing line promises you can "embark on an adventure all your own", so surely it opens up more thereafter? Well, only up to a point. The next chapter for each character comes with a recommended level, which rather forces you to tackle them in a certain order – there is a significant difference between Lv.21 (Primrose) and Lv.27 (H'aanit and Olberic), with the routes between new locations sometimes pitting you against even higher-level opponents to dissuade you from taking them on 'early'. You can afford to have one or two of your party lower than the suggested level, but you'll likely find yourself underpowered when you face the next boss. As such, unless you actively choose to grind characters, you're likely going to have to follow at least four stories to see the endgame, and more realistically five or six. And the formula still doesn't change much: with one or two exceptions, the general tempo and structure of each mini-narrative remains the same. Strictly speaking, the game is non-linear, but you'll still feel as if you're being nudged down a specific path.

> Our heroes don't really pay much attention to one another in any meaningful way

Elsewhere, *Octopath Traveler* falls victim to that classic RPG problem, whereby the player's agenda clashes with that of its characters: when someone is pursuing a goal that's important to them, it makes no sense that they'd allow themselves to be sidetracked. But it's exacerbated here by the game's struggle to reconcile its individual character motivations. As gracious and open-hearted as Ophilia is, it doesn't add up that she'd interrupt her quest to help an old warrior locate a figure from his past; likewise, why would Primrose, desperate to avenge her father, waste time with a scholar who's merely looking for some old book or other? The simple answer, perhaps, is that they're all fundamentally decent people, though that doesn't account for the fact that they're all prepared to turn a blind eye to Therion robbing villagers of their goods.



But then our heroes don't really pay much attention to one another in any meaningful way. Yes, when battle commences, they'll join forces, sharing BP and SP, and pooling their skills to take down monsters and men. And you'll see them traipsing across fields and around towns in a four-person conga line. Yet there's no real sense of togetherness. You're occasionally prompted to press a button to engage in 'travel banter', short conversations or skits where another member of your party reacts to events in the current episode. But that's about as far as it goes. During cutscenes, the other characters will simply disappear, which leads to some faintly nonsensical moments. In one sequence, Primrose must clamber into a carriage taking her to a secret destination, yet when she arrives, everyone else has miraculously made it. And when Cyrus rescues a woman from an evil cultist, she thanks him as if no one else had any involvement in taking him down.

It's in these moments where you begin to appreciate the importance of a common goal, or some kind of overarching plot to tie everything together. If Acquire had let us follow individual character tales from start to finish without interruption, perhaps this would have felt like an adventure all our own. As it stands, while these vignettes give us a glimpse of how JRPGs might benefit from focusing on more intimate, personal stories, these eight mostly separate strands ultimately lack the cohesion of a single, cleverly woven story. ■

The Banner Saga 3

Developer Stoic
Publisher Versus Evil
Format PC (tested), PS4, Switch
Release Out now

Throughout Stoic's gruelling adventure, death has always been in close proximity. Until now, it's been forever at our heroes' backs, its looming shadow getting inexorably closer as they've desperately tried – and occasionally failed – to stay one step ahead of it. Now, in the besieged city of Arberrang, it's all around them. Its walls are just about holding together under the assault of those trying to get inside as darkness threatens to engulf the land; instead, it's collapsing from within, the dire circumstances forcing old animosities to resurface, prejudices to come spilling out, and lawlessness to reign. It's a bold choice to confine half the game to a single location, even if the place is big enough to occasionally traipse back and forth across, as our caravan tries to find somewhere safe to stay. But then our party's journey had to end somewhere, and this is its terminus in every sense.

Meanwhile, the second group also finds itself trapped inside an increasingly claustrophobic space, even as it remains on the move. The onerous task of driving back the encroaching darkness has fallen upon spellweavers Juno and Eyvind, whose magic is keeping them and the reluctant Ravens encased in a protective bubble. But the mercenaries have been misled: their new leader, shieldmaiden Folka, is under Juno's control, and the time is fast approaching when she'll have to drop the pretence and hope there are no reprisals for her trickery. Not least since their old boss Bolverk, now possessed, is not only in pursuit but gaining upon them.

As a result, the tension is even more stifling than before. There's a constant air of menace, the sense that a single, minor disagreement could potentially be the tremor that brings down the entire house of cards. And yet at first, you'll probably feel a certain absence. Over two games we've grown accustomed to the strange beauty of this handsomely desolate world. Now, its strikingly ravaged landscapes suffer a bit from *Metroid Prime 2* syndrome: yes, it's all very bleak and threatening, but does everything have to be quite so *purple*?

Slurping out of this poisonous murk is a new threat – or, rather, old ones given new form. The darkness has warped everything beyond recognition, from the golem-like dredge to axe-wielding soldiers, giving them new powers and passives, and the ability to blight you even beyond death: once defeated, they'll leave behind toxic pools that sap your willpower. Others grow tendrils that snake across several squares, targeting units you thought were beyond melee range, while creepy, crawling beasts burrow underneath the battlefield, emerging to cause trouble. Outside the city you can't blow your horn for a morale boost, though you can call upon a lightning spell that chains diagonally – yet there's every chance the second fork might just hit one of your own. Stoic's battle animations have always captured a sense of weight, but here you can almost feel the exhaustion of one-armed giant Iver in the effort it takes to bring his axe down on another of those pesky slingers.

The tension is even more stifling than before. There's a constant air of menace



If your opponents are tougher than ever, it's only right that your own combat experience should have prepared you to deal with them. Your strongest units can be given new heroic titles, with additional perks to lean into their individual talents. You could make the sneaky Dytch even more stealthy, reducing his chance of aggroing enemy units and boosting his movement, or dub enigmatic spearman Tryggvi 'The Foolish', increasing his strength and critical-hit percentage at the cost of his armour. New wave-based battles, meanwhile, let you get your hands on powerful items should you defeat the boss at the end: with some of these boosting your talents to give you a high chance to pierce armour or dodge hits to your strength, they're worth fighting for, though given the likelihood of leaving your units incapacitated for a day or two, you might feel like fleeing after the first wave is the smarter option. Either way, it's a reminder that death isn't going away anytime soon.

In fact, Arberrang gets its own doomsday clock after a while, as your accumulated decisions so far buy you a certain amount of time to get things fixed. Should it hit zero, you'll return to the city, where the dangers have increased, and you're forced to make tough choices to minimise casualties. By our second return visit, an entire district was ablaze; other players may witness a wall tumbling down, but either way there's tangible visual evidence of the human cost of your decisions.

It's grim stuff, but it makes for consistently absorbing drama, to the point that you won't miss being on your travels so much. Besides, it's only right that the focus should fall on the world within Arberrang's walls: the land beyond, after all, has been lost, but there's a chance that its inhabitants can yet be saved. They won't all make it, that's for sure, with Stoic setting up a series of brutal surprises that show just about all bets are off, as unlikely saviours emerge, and cracks show in formerly robust alliances. It's elevated by marvellous sound design – the low chime that accompanies each passing day sounds like a clock sounding out a death knell – while there's more than a hint of madness in Austin Wintory's formidable score, which encapsulates the swirling chaos that threatens to engulf everyone.

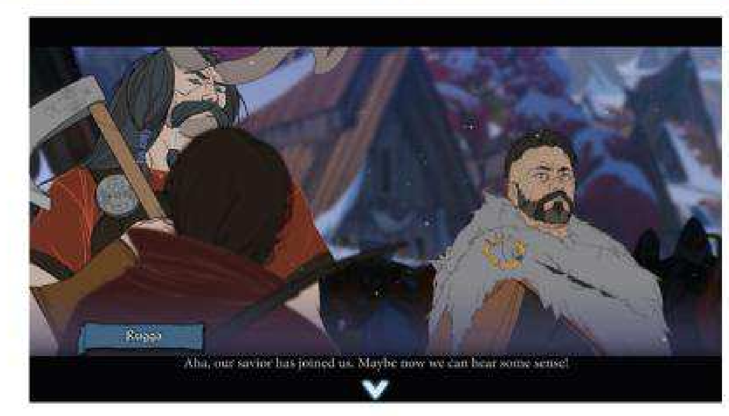
Even with that thick streak of tar-black humour occasionally filtering through the cracks, the story's relentlessness can sometimes seem overwhelming. But this closing chapter offers something rare and powerful. Plenty of games examine what life is like after an apocalypse; for once we're seeing what happens while it's all going down, letting us bear witness to the very best and worst of humanity. Ferocious and heartbreaking, this is storytelling with serious clout: against the odds, Stoic has stuck the landing.

9

ABOVE If the battlefield can still seem too cluttered, it feels oddly fitting here. Corpses strewn around the edges give you an idea of just how bad things are in Arberrang. LEFT Shifty witch Alfrun is the pick of the newcomers: her special ability lets her zip forward up to nine spaces to stab an opponent before returning to her spot



BELOW Yes, that's a dredge on our team. Bastion's ludicrously high armour stat makes him extremely useful, though whether he's worth its significant cost is debatable



ABOVE The brilliantly awful Rugga is back, and has a key role to play in the game. The opportunity to punish him may be hard for series veterans to resist, but as hateful as he is, he knows Arberrang better than most





There's an inevitability to some plot events, though that doesn't stop you from hoping they might not come to pass

Post Script

How The Banner Saga makes a virtue of its unfairness (contains spoilers)

Comparisons between *The Banner Saga* and *Fire Emblem* aren't far wide of the mark. You start with a small band of heroes, steadily accumulating more on your travels, knowing all the while that there's a strong chance some of them won't make it to the closing credits. It stings to lose a unit in either game. Yet in *Fire Emblem*, barring the occasional unfortunate dice roll, any loss is always your own fault. In Stoic's series, you can be left without a valued fighter by a decision you took outside battle with no way of knowing the outcome. It sounds grotesquely unfair, and at times it certainly feels that way. And yet the game simply shrugs and invites you to accept it. And, somehow, it works.

It's partly a matter of consistency. At the end of the first game you face a choice that means losing one of your two leads. Whether you choose Rook or his daughter Alette to fire the arrow to defeat the Dredge demi-god Bellower, they're subsequently killed. At which point, if Stoic hadn't already made it obvious, just about anyone is fair game for the developer's axe.

This sends a clear message to the player: don't get too attached to anyone. Sure, you're supposed to care about these characters up to a point, but with the threat of death hanging above everyone, it pays not to invest too much in individual units. It's a way for Stoic to ensure you don't simply end up with two or three hugely overpowered characters that rout the enemy on their own. For the sake of good balance on the battlefield, it's something of a necessary evil.

And the new wave-based skirmishes introduced in *The Banner Saga* 3 are the perfect way to build up anyone you've left benched for a while. Chances are, after the first wave, you'll have one or two units down and out, or at least weakened sufficiently to require a substitute to start warming up. You might well find your bard suddenly becoming a first-team regular, their ability to champion heroes and insult the opposition making a bigger difference than you thought. Or you can simply give the weak links the spoils of battle – assuming they've reached the required level, of course – to give them a fighting chance. Besides, given that the stakes have been raised for this final chapter, and losses are more frequent, you're going to have to rely on a larger pool of units anyway.

This all makes sense from a narrative standpoint, too. If you've chosen to ignore Stoic's warnings, and maxed out the stats of one or two units, it hurts all the more when they're no longer available. Take Nid, for example, our deadliest archer for the better part of two games. We've promoted her ahead of anyone else, her accuracy earning her dozens of kills, letting us max out most of her stats. So when she suddenly decides she's had enough of all this death, taking her chances away from the caravan, we feel somewhat winded.

Likewise when, after deciding Folka hasn't steered us far wrong, we trust her judgement one too many times, and suddenly our level 15, dredge-obliterating shieldmaiden is no more. Shortly afterwards, when scenarios within Arberrang leave us close to losing both Tryggvi and Bak, we begin to wonder if Stoic isn't deliberately targeting our favourite units, with the cannon fodder left annoyingly untouched.

The fact that you care enough either way is to the developer's significant credit. Through its storytelling *and* its systems, *The Banner Saga* has established a large cast of characters who all have a role to play, no matter how small. As the bard Aleo says, "The true hero comes reluctantly." So it often proves here. Amid all that bleakness, there is something genuinely heartwarming about an underdog suddenly finding its bark: a touching moment of defiance in the face of impending disaster. ■

Dead Cells

There's a fundamental tension at the heart of *Dead Cells*. Are you going to play fast, or slow? The former is going to get you into trouble in a game whose enemies take no prisoners. But there's value to it. As you play, a timer ticks up in the corner of the screen, and at the start of each new level is a door bound to the in-game clock. A haul of loot awaits inside.

To get inside the first one, you'll need to clear the opening level in under two minutes. A door after the first boss, which appears after three levels, must be reached within 15 minutes. Speed, however, only gets you so far; maps are procedurally generated, so level exits are in a different place every time you play. It's a fine way of explaining *Dead Cells* as a whole: this is a game that puts tough, game-defining decisions in front of you every few minutes, but never quite lets you feel in full control of your destiny.

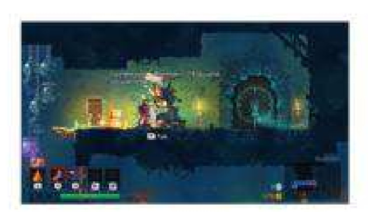
You've certainly got all the tools you need, even though death dumps you right back at the start of the game, your entire inventory lost for good to the winds. The protagonist is fast, mobile and an absolute pleasure to control, with an invincible dash, a double jump and whatever gear he can find along the way. You can only carry two weapons a time; one for melee combat, the other a bow, shield or projectile. This isn't a game about hoovering up everything in sight, but making considered choices about your loadout. The same applies to two equippable skills bound to cooldowns – a range of traps, turrets and throwable status effects that can feel godlike in one situation and useless in the next.

Die, and you lose the lot, though Cells, which drop randomly from defeated enemies, ensure all is not completely lost. In between levels you visit a safe zone with a number of merchants where you can cash in your gathered wares and tinker with your loadout. The Collector will exchange Cells for permanent upgrades: extra swigs from your health flask, the ability to refresh a mid-level shop's stock, or unlocking the weapon and gear blueprints you find in the world. Behind The Collector is a locked door that won't open until you've spent all your Cells, a kindly design decision that numbs, if only a little, the pain of death.

Next, a blacksmith offers weapon upgrades and, crucially, re-rolls of their stats. Your aim is to fashion synergy from what you've scavenged: if you've got a fire projectile, say, you'll want a sword with a damage bonus on burning enemies. The throwable might be re-rolled to extend its status effect, and to fire an arrow or throw a grenade at the same time. It's a vital system if you're to progress, and the reason new loot drops ask such a difficult question. That sword you've just found may have a higher DPS stat, but picking it up means losing your current blade's 175 per cent ice-damage boost. Can you really be sure of reaching the level exit so you can re-roll it into something more appropriate for your build?

Developer/publisher Twin Motion
Format PC, PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The result is, at its best, intoxicating, a fast, pacey, tremendously challenging game



RUNE AND DEADLY
Your modest traversal moveset – double-jump, dodge-roll and ground slam – can be expanded using Runes, a series of permanent upgrades hidden in devious places. Over time you'll gain the ability to teleport between certain statues, break through weak floors with your ground pound, and even run up walls. While the Metroidvania label has been used to describe *Dead Cells*, it's not an accurate reflection of what these new abilities do. You'll find more treasure this way, and open up alternate routes through the game, but you can complete the whole thing using only the starting moveset. One essential rune unlocks a daily challenge level, accessed from the starting zone, that gives you a fixed loadout to use in a timed high-score chase.

Mutations allow for even further specialisation. You can equip a maximum of three per run, conveying a range of passive bonuses. Ygdar Orus Li Ox is essential: as its acronym suggests, it allows you to carry on after your first death. Others might boost your HP, or double your projectile ammo, or offer timed damage bonuses after you kill an enemy, get hit, or chug your health flask. Mutations, like weapons and gear, are colour-coded, their effectiveness scaling with how you've invested the power-up scrolls across three tiers of stats.

It's a dizzying web of interlocking systems that mean you're constantly making decisions of weight and consequence. Some of our best runs have come not just from playing well, but making smart choices; likewise we've lost many a late-game charge to an ill-advised gamble. The result is, at its best, intoxicating, a fast, pacey, tremendously challenging game.

Yet no game built so brazenly on a foundation of RNG can consistently reach such heights. Some runs begin with gear so bad you might as well just surrender to the first enemy you see. The procedural algorithm handling level design can throw up some drab layouts, and occasionally a disproportionately unmanageable cluster of enemies. And while a middling loadout can get you a decent way into the game, if you don't get a kindly weapon drop for the late-game surge, you don't stand much of a chance.

Especially when the bosses are concerned. These are the game's weak spot, with repetitive movesets and colossal health bars, even if you've got the best tools for the job. *Dead Cells* is in obvious stylistic hock to *Dark Souls*, but here the bosses respawn when you do; you'll have to fight them on every run, and unlike the procedural levels, the fight's the same every time.

The game's biggest problem, however, is in weapon balance, which is odd for a game that's been in Early Access for 15 months. The Ice Bow is by far the most useful weapon in the game, its ability to freeze enemies in place, then slow them as they thaw, trivialising most encounters. It makes other drops in that slot frustrating, and can push too many runs down the same path: get Ice Bow, spec for ice bonuses, and off you go. It's hard to force yourself to deviate from such an obviously powerful build, and it rather undermines all the good work done on those complex, interwoven systems.

Yet that is only a blemish on a frequently wonderful game. Indeed, Ice Bow simply becomes another decision for you to make in a game that is full of them; one that is the same, yet feels different, every time, that makes you daydream about possible builds, about optimal routes to take, about a near endless array of new things to try. You might lose everything you've gathered when you die, but your love for *Dead Cells* will endure, and grow ever stronger.

8







ABOVE Unlocked gear is tracked by this display in the prisoner's quarters where you begin each run. It's intended, we suppose, to reflect your constant progress, though early on is more disheartening than motivating

MAIN The algorithm has a habit of spawning these hard-hitting red birds in flocks, but area-of-effect skills make short work of them. ABOVE The Watcher awaits at the top of the Clock Tower stage, in which you must find a key hidden in the level before you can access the exit. Stage designs grow more demanding as you progress. RIGHT Ah, a late-game boss. What's that in our ranged-weapon slot? Why, a legendary Ice Bow. We love a powerful weapon as much as anyone, but not when it makes everything else feel so weedy



Hollow Knight

Sometimes, you *do* get a second chance to make a first impression. Arriving on PC last February – yes, the same month that brought us *Nioh* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, and just before a little game called *Breath Of The Wild* – *Hollow Knight* escaped the notice of many, including yours truly. No more. A Switch release has rescued it from the obscurity of an oversaturated marketplace and afforded it a fresh spotlight. A spotlight that it more than deserves: *Hollow Knight* is an astounding accomplishment, an expert refinement of the Metroidvania that wills you onward and keeps revealing more of itself the deeper you go. Break its surface, and you'll soon find it difficult to break its spell.

The surface appears to be a sort of *Dark Souls: Insect Edition*. Playing as the diminutive Knight, you're simply dropped into labyrinthine Hallownest with nothing but a nail with which to defend yourself. The subterranean world is populated by all manner of creepy-crawlies – some friendly, some not so friendly – that you slay to collect a currency called Geo, spent on becoming more powerful. Benches work as checkpoints, offering a chance to rest and recover health. Die in battle, and you leave behind a Shade containing the Geo you were holding. Hallownest itself is a seemingly endless sprawl of winding pathways and hidden passages, punctuated by NPCs that dole out clues as to how this place came to exist, and continues to. Perhaps unsurprisingly, at this point, it involves a kind of cycle.

Familiar, then. Yet the two-man team at Team Cherry insists it hadn't played much of Miyazaki's classic at all when work on its game began. Instead, *Hollow Knight* works from the same influences as *Souls* – early *Zelda* is a clear touchstone – and the path deviates as much as it runs parallel. *Hollow Knight* may be set underground, but it's far from claustrophobic. While *Dark Souls* is purposefully oppressive, *Hollow Knight* offers breathing space. The tone is set by the health system. You earn Soul by striking enemies, which you can then 'focus' to heal by holding down a button. It's capable of salvaging a potentially disastrous run to the next bench – as long as you are. If you can mentally reset when flustered, and patiently, carefully get your hits in, you'll earn back health. While *Bloodborne* has a similar mechanic, it demands that you rush in before your window of opportunity disappears, and frequently makes you the fool. Here, you have time to back off, and gather yourself with the grace befitting a warrior.

It changes everything. Rather than throwing in the towel (and the Knight into the nearest spike pit) to start from scratch at the nearest checkpoint fully replenished, it's an incentive to push forward, and play smarter. And it's not without risk: if you flub your timing, aborting a heal early to avoid incoming attack, you can waste Soul. Still, it makes for a markedly friendlier experience than most of its kind. And it's appreciated as Hallownest becomes increasingly hostile, doling out abilities with meticulous pacing that makes each feel like a godsend – a fireball, a dash and a wall jump among the first few.

Developer/publisher Team Cherry
Format PC, Switch (tested)
Release Out now

Insect-themed design lets it dance either side of the line between adorable and unsettling



CHARM SCHOOL
Resting on a bench lets you tinker with your Charm loadout, allowing you to change up your playstyle often. The intricate badges can be found, earned or bought, and grant the Knight useful buffs. Wayward Compass is an essential early purchase, but we find ourselves unequipping it once we're used to an area's layout, putting the space towards a three-slot Quick Focus charm that lets us heal faster. You can buy more slots, if you've collected enough, from an NPC in the Forgotten Crossroads – and certain charm combinations even alter and enhance their power. But beware: insist on equipping more than you're able to, and you're in for a nasty surprise.

Team Cherry's impeccably constructed world gives off the convincing illusion of freedom while deftly funnelling you onwards, surprises at every turn feeling like true discoveries as a result. We've followed laughter expecting a friendly chap selling something useful, only to be locked into a boss fight against a marauding dung beetle; the first time we meet the Hunter, we resign ourselves to being eaten alive before creeping forward to strike up a conversation. Each character you meet offers something, whether it's an essential map of the area, access to nail, health or Soul upgrades, or simply a new tale to enjoy. Their charming designs and distinctive personalities make them worth revisiting often. Even the first method of fast travel, a giant stag beetle, has a character arc that you'll want to see through to its beautiful conclusion – and you should spare Zote from his doom, and rescue damsel-in-distress Bretta, lest you miss out on one of the funniest sidequests around.

Some levity is welcome in a place populated with parasites that burst into multiple forms, like horrifying matryoshka dolls, or chittering spiders whose legs erupt from within corpses to scuttle after you. Hallownest will also gleefully lure you into traps. Its cruellest practical joke is a collapsible floor in an early area that spits you out into a place that's essentially Blighttown with a functional framerate and some evil twists.

Surprisingly, it's not Deepnest that's the sticking point in *Hollow Knight*. Instead, it's the platforming. More often than not, challenges are fiendish, but fair. An overemphasis on using the Knight's downward strike to bounce on spikes, however, is annoying. The timing and input is overly precise at first, dropping to wearyingly unreliable once you've upgraded your nail's range. The health system is moot, as you only get Soul for hitting enemies: we often find ourselves halfway through a gauntlet with a single health point, no Soul, and the nearest bench miles away from another attempt.

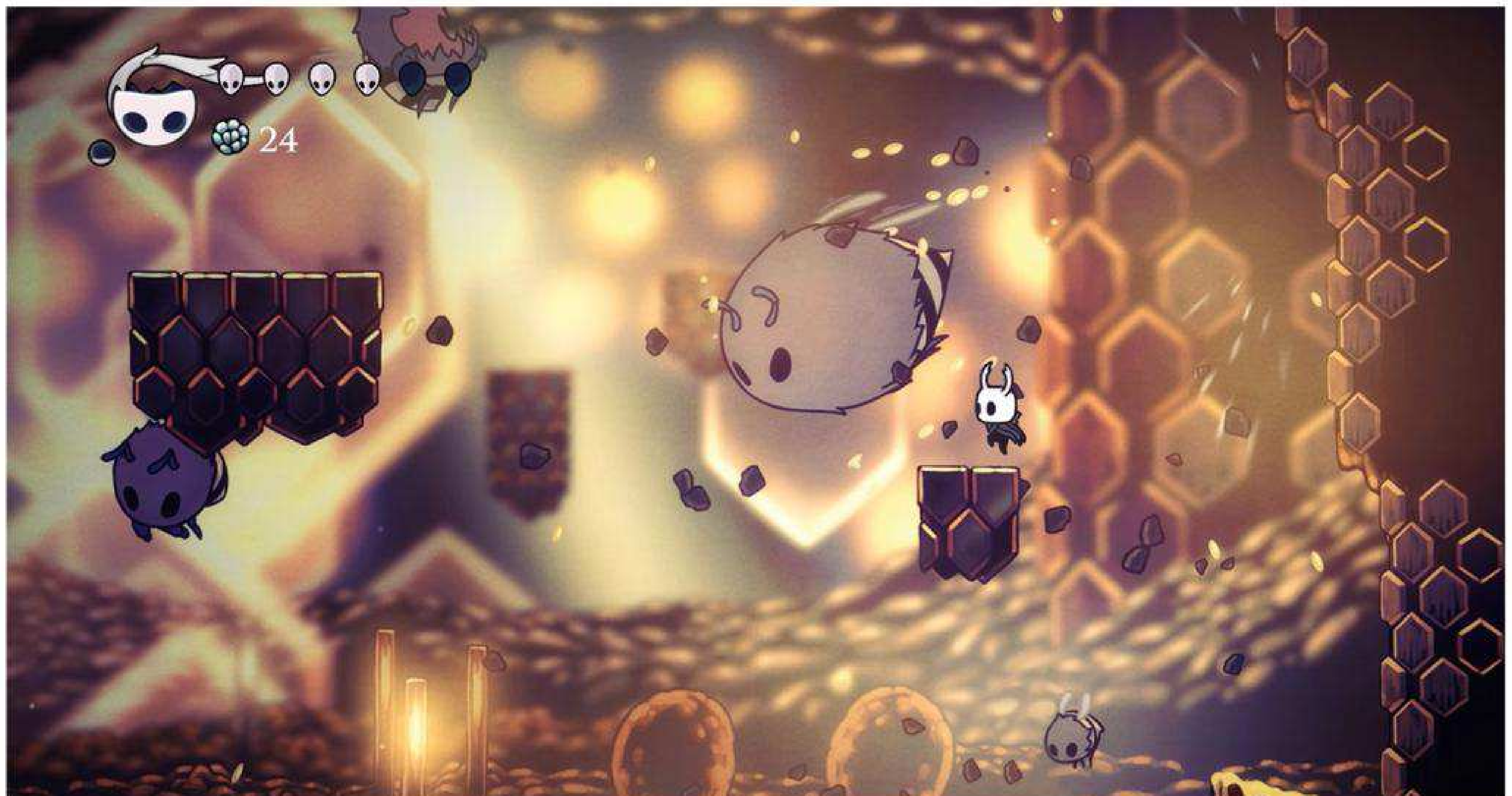
It's a rare flaw in some otherwise consistently masterful design. What an achievement Hallownest is: its insect-themed design letting it dance either side of the line between adorable and unsettling, a place that tucks its tales away without guarding them too jealously, that prints its twisting tunnels and lamplit tableaus behind the eyelids and upon the memory. It *wants* to be found, and remembered, and every piece of its unified whole leads you deeper still, until there you remain. In fact, we're not sure why we're so taken aback. If the kinds of story *Hollow Knight* and its predecessors tell have taught us anything, it's that the things we need most always come back around, reborn in new and glorious form.

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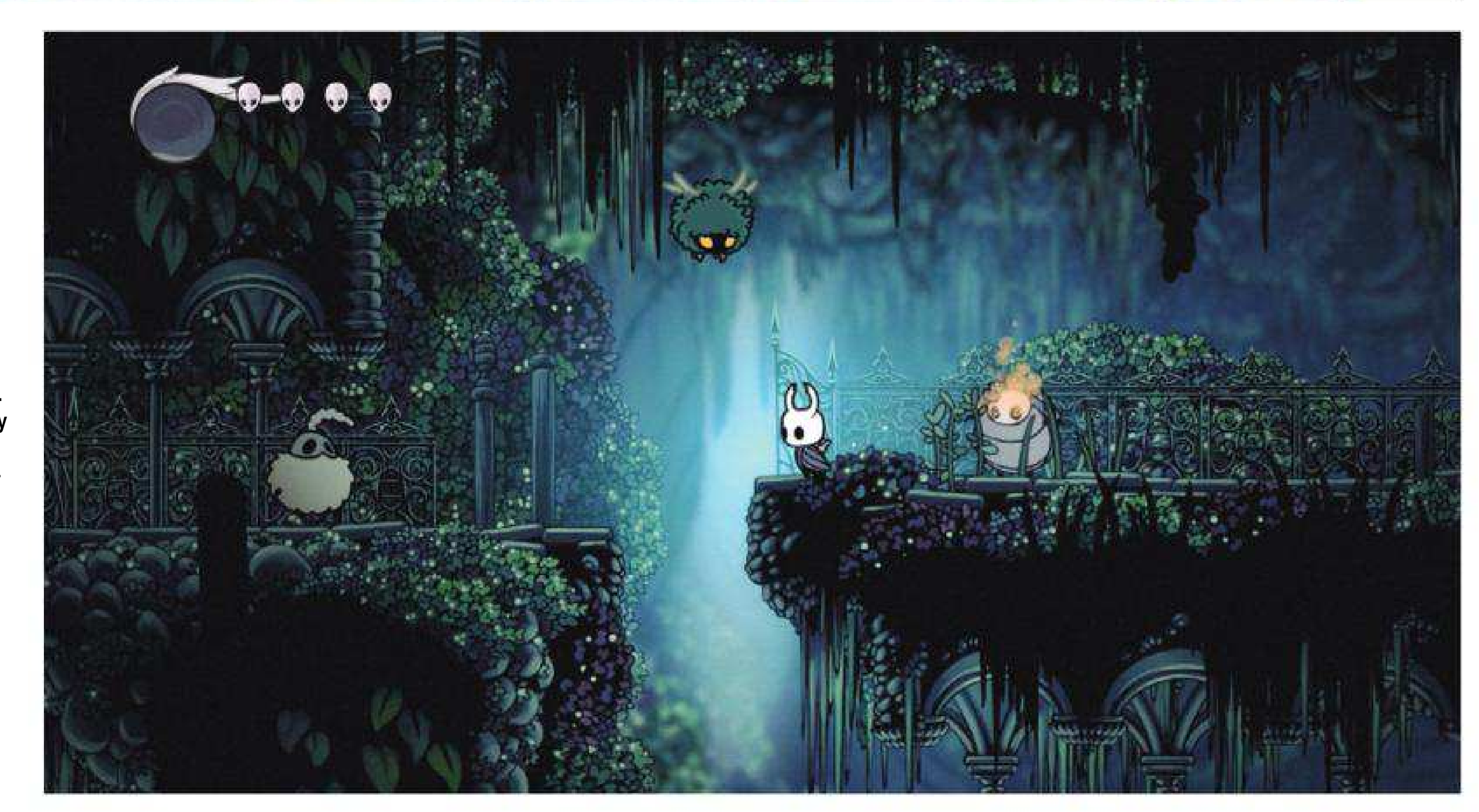




ABOVE Quiet moments make Hallownest feel like a real place instead of a maze of powerups: a rest with a friend at a bench, a hot spring containing two gossipy bugs. This here is a wistful interlude – unless you get too close



TOP The first boss fight is a good tone-setter, demanding skill and patience without being too punishing, the character design as creepy as it is goofy. Return to the scene with a new ability, and you'll uncover a harrowing secret.
MAIN Even with tight controls, platforming is tricky when you're getting powerbombed by massive bees. Get used to it: a late-game ability provides yet another reason to revisit every area in the game beyond the proliferation of secrets.
RIGHT Hallownest is preternaturally pretty, and also realistically laid-out: the further down from middle-map civilisation, the danker and denser each layer gets, and at the very top, Crystal Peak's industrial heights sparkle with soulless ore



The Persistence

VR games are hot work at the best of times, but you'll really get a sweat on with Firesprite's survival-horror Roguelike. Though that's not because of the stomach-lurching effect firstperson VR can have. No one should get queasy on the step-turn Novice setting here. And the halfway-house between that and full FPS controls is comfortable to such an extent that even shooter vets might stick with it, its combination of quick turning and vignetting meaning long sessions pass without even the slightest gut-flutter. Rather, it's the ship's mutated inhabitants and the welcome they offer as they lunge out of the darkness that'll give you cause to mop your brow. Perhaps it should have been called *The Perspiration* instead.

The nervous tension of those early runs is amplified by the ship itself, which, thanks to an anomaly in the deck computer's code, reshuffles its layout every time. In a linear horror game, you know where the scares are coming from your second time around, and can prepare yourself accordingly. Here, you have no choice but to inch forward carefully, because your surroundings aren't the same – and nor are the threats you'll face. Even so, you'll steadily gain confidence in dealing with the various enemy archetypes, from the twitchy Listeners to the steroidal Berserkers. But developer Firesprite always seems one step ahead, subtly transforming a lean fear machine into a full-on action-horror, the mutant count escalating as you accrue more perks and weapons to handle the lower-level threats. Eventually, you'll find yourself pursued by a Bloodhound – a combination of The Terminator's relentlessness and the resilience of *Resident Evil 3*'s Nemesis – while a teleporting Weeper fires off powerful beams to freeze you in your tracks, and skittering Lurkers lie in wait till you relax your guard.

But at first, you're armed with nothing more than a handheld DNA harvester, which does its job in delightfully grisly fashion, launching snaking probes that penetrate through to a victim's spine to suck out the stem cells. The corpses of *The Persistence*'s crew give you fresh bodies to print off for next time, their individual perks related to their previous role: a medical officer can harvest quicker, while the security officer you begin with gives you a discount at the various weapon fabricators you'll find scattered across each deck. Otherwise, the cells can be spent on augmenting the clones you use on subsequent runs, offering boosts to health, melee damage, stealth and your reserves of dark matter. The latter two are far more expensive, which speaks to their usefulness. At first, it might seem sensible to build clones that don't die within a couple of hits, but then reducing your noise output makes it far more likely you won't be spotted in the first place. Meanwhile the matter that powers your short-range teleporter and your super-sense ability – which lets you briefly see enemy heat signatures through walls – is invaluable given the dim lighting, and the dismal range of your flashlight's beam. With more reserves to draw from in a pinch, it's easier to make your escape.

Developer/publisher Firesprite
Format PSVR
Release Out now

You have no choice but to inch forward carefully, because your surroundings aren't the same

Creeping around everywhere only pays off up to a point, and Firesprite is far too keen on its weapons to encourage the slow-and-sneaky approach for the entire game. The game's arsenal includes variants on the magnum, pistol and SMG, while the grenades are perfect for clearing larger rooms with several hostiles. Just let the electronic door slide open, toss one in and watch the carnage unfold. Better still are the experimental options. The Grav Hook allows you to draw in mutants and blast them away, or even break their bones by jerking your head this way and that as they ragdoll into scenery. One type of serum can be injected into a single enemy to have it follow you like a lovelorn puppy, albeit one that's aggressively keen to protect its master; another temporarily renders you indestructible while letting you punch enemies into mush.

Find enough tokens and you can upgrade them permanently; though you'll need more fabricator chips to pay for replacements, the extra perks for fully specced options are worth the time you'll spend scouring cleared rooms for loot. And with a bit of outside assistance, you won't have to look too hard: a free companion app gives a second player a wireframe overview of the current deck, letting them incapacitate threats, open doors and identify nearby pickups. Then again, they might prefer to make things harder, shutting off the lights and aggroing mutants, especially with the incentive of new abilities unlocked by points awarded for good *and* bad deeds.

There's a strong sense of forward momentum, even after setbacks: if nothing else, you're sure to return from a failed attempt with more of every type of currency. And once you've completed any of the handful of set objectives you're given to effectively reboot the ship, you won't have to repeat the process, ensuring you're never really back to square one. These goals lie behind some well-orchestrated scripted sequences, with one negating your dark-matter abilities while forcing you down claustrophobic crawlspaces, and another inviting you to use mutants as an energy source.

If the story isn't really up to much (neither's the voice acting, for that matter) it serves its purpose as a rudimentary framework, its straightforward missions giving you something to aim for while letting you focus on the essentials of moment-to-moment survival. You may not care about your character so much as what you stand to lose by dying, but in the heat of the moment there's no real difference anyway: your natural instinct to fight for your life will kick in all the same. So yes, it can be sticky work, but it says much for this bracingly exciting game that you'll be itching to put your headset back on just as soon as you've cooled off.

8



CRATE EXPECTATIONS
You won't get many loot drops at all early on, but on the later decks you'll find schematics for enhanced suits, teleporters, harvesters and forcefields more frequently – though it's one thing getting your hands on these blueprints, quite another being able to afford to pay for the rarest and best of them when you return to the master deck. If you're sufficiently tooled up, however, you can find some within special supply crates on each deck. These might lie beyond depressurised corridors that you'll need a full health bar (or the invisibility power, which boosts your walking speed) to make it through, or as a reward for surviving a combat room, into which waves of enemies will spawn. Even so, it's a lot of ammo to risk when you don't know the reward on offer.

RIGHT Parrying Engineer or Lurker attacks at the last moment will let you quickly harvest their stem cells: the most effective, and rewarding, way to deal with them. BELOW It pays to crouch and lean around corners when entering a new room or corridor: sentries are alert to your movement, and their bolts do a lot of damage. MAIN You've got a limited window of time to deal with the Weepers before they teleport, at which point you'll need to look all around you to make sure you're out of sight







ABOVE The player using the headset can briefly earn revenge on anyone menacing them with the companion app by hacking their display to temporarily prevent them from interfering



Pocket Rumble

Credit where it's due, that's a perfect name. *Pocket Rumble* is, as those of you with a little salt in their hair might have guessed, something of a love letter to the Neo Geo Pocket. Yet it's also a fine descriptor for a game which achieves something rare indeed: a fighting game that's perfectly playable in local Switch co-op, with each player using a single Joy-Con.

Anyone who's tried to play a traditional fighter on one of Switch's detachable controllers will know the pain too well. The analogue stick isn't quite where you'd like it, a little too close to the centre, and honestly you'd prefer a D-pad. The shoulder buttons are a little hard to find, too. Six-button fighters are playable, just about, but far from optimal.

Pocket Rumble's solution is elegant, intuitive and, crucially, involves no dumbing down whatsoever. The game is played using only two buttons, with downward diagonals on the D-pad, and length of button press, performing different moves. Nudge the stick down-forward and tap one button, for instance, and you might get a sweep. Keep the button pressed and you'll get a fireball. It's ingenious, in its way, giving its cast of characters access to a full fighting-game moveset using what effectively boils down to two inputs.

Singleplayer AI isn't up to much, unfortunately, and varies tremendously from one character to the next. Tenchi plays a solid footsies game and Parker parries well, but Keiko spams her cat attack with reckless abandon

Developer Chucklefish
Publisher Cardboard Robot Games
Format Switch
Release Out now



SLENDER BUILD
Pocket Rumble's pared-back mechanical design extends to its structure: this offers the bare essentials of a fighting-game package, and nothing more. Offline, there's an Arcade ladder, and a Career mode that tracks XP earned from fights against AI bots; online matches are powered by the best-in-class fighting-game netcode GGPO. A slender series of combo trials teaches you the basics of how each character should be used. Slim, yes, but entirely in keeping with the spirit of the game.

Developer Cardboard Robot doesn't stop there, either. The cast of characters, while admittedly based on fighting-game archetypes, are a tremendously varied bunch. Sure, there's a Ryu analogue in Tenchi, but there's also June, an undead girl who uses her head as a projectile, and we don't remember seeing any of those in *Street Fighter*. Nor has Capcom ever borrowed an extra from a Twin Peaks diner like Agent Parker.

Yet it's in their playstyles that this roster of oddball characters truly comes alive. As genre standard dictates, a super meter fills as you perform moves. Yet each of the game's fighters uses it in a different way. Parker has a parry with a deliciously generous timing window. June can drop a clone of herself on screen. Naomi, a baseball-capped brawler with a run manoeuvre, can only use her meter for EX versions of special moves – but can charge her bar back up in open play with a button combination. It's smart stuff, the controls meaning that if you can play one character, you can play them all, but that each handles very differently to the others.

Combo timings can feel a little strict – and, like so many games in this genre, could be better explained to novice players – but that's easy to forgive in a game that strips away so many common fighting-game frustrations with such an easy elegance. They say the best things come in small packages; it turns out they fit in pockets, too.





Radio Hammer Station

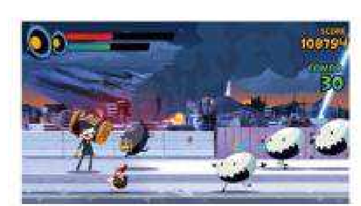
To be honest, we'd happily have paid £7 for the title screen. *Radio Hammer Station*'s main menu music is a solid-gold, diamond-encrusted banger, an immaculate slice of electro-disco-jazz that wouldn't feel out of place at the start of a *Persona* game. It's a fitting introduction for a game whose style and soundtrack are almost beyond reproach. If only the rest of the game could match it.

Mechanically, this is an astonishingly simple rhythm game. The note-chart targets are styled as enemies that must be whacked away with the protagonist's weapon – a hammer, an umbrella, an electric guitar. Yet they only attack on one of two planes, high or low. A curveball never comes – finishing a story mission unlocks a variant called Another Mode, but this merely sees enemies sprinting towards you instead of sauntering.

The only spanner in the works comes from gifts, which have a percentage chance of appearing behind you at the end of every four-bar phrase. They're designed to put you off, diverting your attention from the field of play, and they certainly do their job, like someone tapping you on the shoulder to ask if you want a cuppa during a *Guitar Hero* solo. For the most part, they can be safely ignored – indeed, it's often smarter to do so.

The game never surpasses the creepiness of the opening chapter, where missing a beat sees the aggressor opening his raincoat at our hammer-wielding heroine. We're not sure where you'd go from there, to be honest

Developer Arc System Works
Publisher FK Digital
Format PS4, Switch (tested), Vita
Release Out now



ORIGINAL PIRATE MATERIAL
The story, if you can call it that, tells of the titular Radio Hammer – the world's greatest music station, apparently. Each story-mode stage puts you in the sparkly shoes of one of its DJs, and each character's campaign section features music supposedly tailored to their tastes, though we'll admit to being surprised by DJ Wayne's penchant for disco. Together the crew keep the streets safe from a roll call of wrong 'uns. For all its flaws, never has a game had so diverse a cast of bad guys as *Radio Hammer Station*'s pervs, aliens, zombies and nerdy superfans.

Gift-box bonuses are minor, topping up either a health bar that's never really an issue because of the game's simplicity, or a super meter that's barely worthy of the name. Yes, the super's combo protection and guaranteed perfect hits are useful in theory. But since you have no control over it – it triggers automatically as soon as the bar is filled – it has no strategic benefits.

As such you'll likely only bother with gift boxes when the secondary objectives tell you to. If you want a three-star rating for a stage, you might need a certain number of perfect hits, or a clear with no misses; to pick up every gift box, or ignore all the traps. Whether you'll bother is another matter: this is a generous enough game as it is, with almost 100 songs, and it'll take a rare sort of obsessive to want to max everything out.

It's a little too simplistic, and repetitive, to stick with for long, but in short bursts the style of the thing comes to the fore. The music, spanning jazz, disco, reggae, hip-hop, anime-battle heavy metal and just about anything you can name, is top drawer. The setting is modern-day Japan, and while a little off-putting in places – a young girl fending off a perverts' convention in a theme park is a bit much, if we're honest – it's presented with such vim and colour that it's hard to dislike too much. And when you do tire of it all, you can just drop back to the main menu, and leave it on loop for a while.

5



Danger Zone 2

By transplanting the *Burnout* series' Crash junctions to a sterile underground test facility, Three Fields' first *Danger Zone* seemed as if it fundamentally misunderstood the transgressive appeal of the original mode. A year later, its sequel has sensibly gone back outdoors, with roads and motorways heaving with traffic to smash into. Ploughing through hatchbacks and caravans on the M62 in a semi truck, shunting vans and cars across multiple lanes – this is the kind of power fantasy we crave. And how about the cathartic pleasure of demolishing multiple taxis en route to LAX? Better.

Which is to say that there's a longer build-up to the game's explosive pay-offs, with individual challenges to complete as you make your way there. You might, for example, have to take down a certain number of vans on the way, or nudge smaller vehicles into trucks, causing them to jackknife. There are ramps to speed up and jump off, with an optional slo-mo view that can be triggered by pressing the left bumper, the game's camera cutting away to a cinematic wide angle as you fly through the air. Other challenges are about avoiding collisions, as you weave your way between trucks and swerve to dodge oncoming cars at breakneck speed in order to successfully chain boosts. It's slight but exhilarating stuff, and bodes well for the developer's spiritual *Burnout* successor *Dangerous Driving*.

After a given number of crashes you can trigger the Smashbreaker, an explosion that causes carnage around you, while letting you steer your wreck in mid-air – hopefully towards the scattered score-boosting bronze, silver and gold pickups, or to the other Smashbreaker tokens that let you detonate your vehicle again. In the grand *Burnout* tradition, to get any real movement you'll need to jam the analogue stick in the appropriate direction until it feels like it's coming free from its moorings. And yes, your plans can once again be ruined by a single vehicle belatedly skidding across your path just before you grabbed the gold.

It's a game that lets you get a move on even when your foot isn't on the gas, resetting you at the start within moments of a failed run, or automatically launching a new course within ten seconds of passing a bronze-medal target. Yet other elements feel decidedly rushed. We've seen better menus in one-dollar XBLIG titles, while collisions are inconsistent, and some stages are needlessly punishing: one, featuring a tediously long run-up to a bizarrely exacting jump, makes a mockery of those speedy restarts. Sure, Three Fields might not have the resources its founders once did, but it feels as if the studio was in rather too much of a hurry to get this one out the door.

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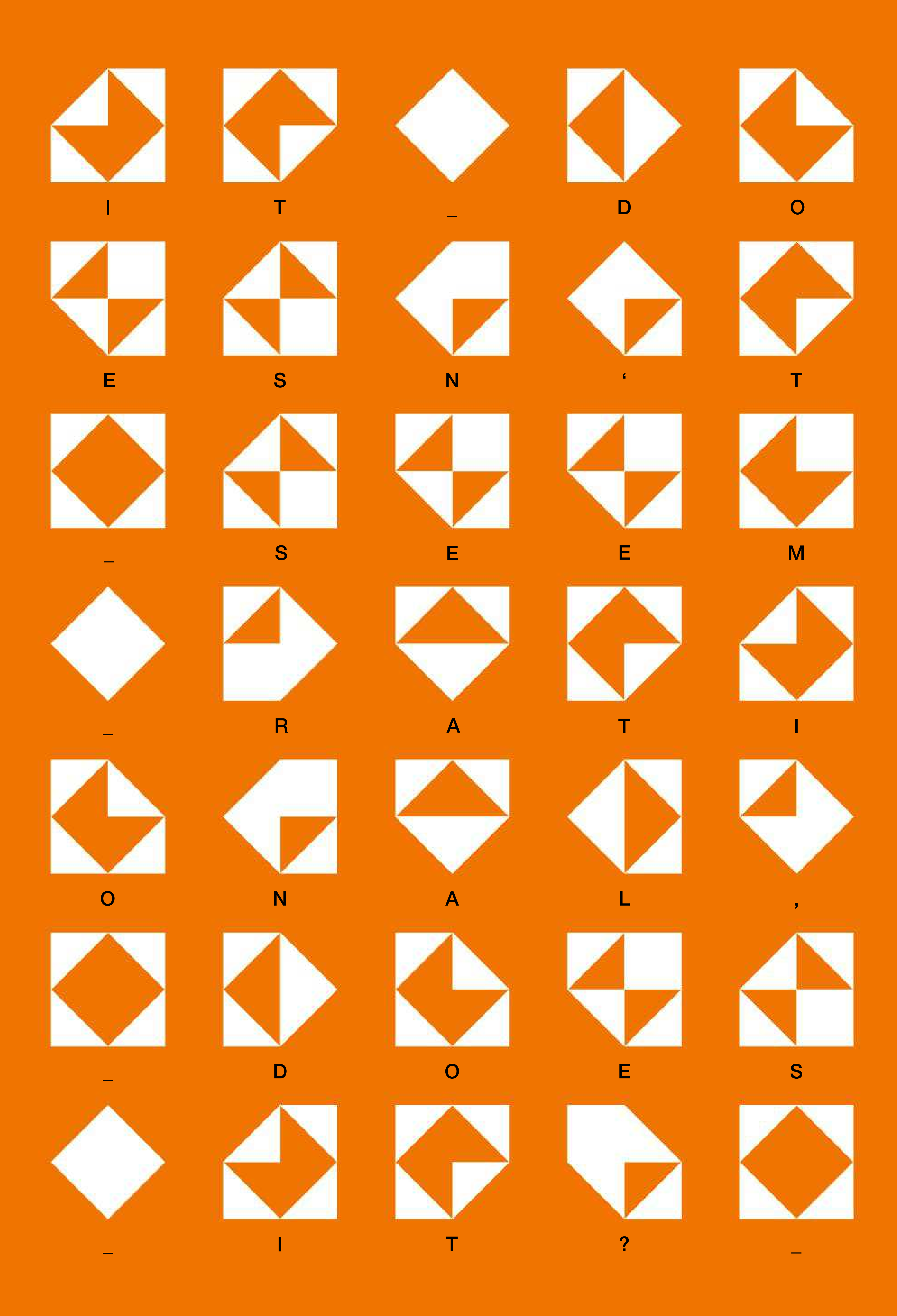
Developer/publisher Three Fields Entertainment
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



THREE FOR THE ROAD
Pass all 23 levels, and you'll unlock a trio of three-lap time-trial bonus stages. They're typical *Burnout*-style courses, with long straights and relatively gentle bends: tailor-made for chaining boosts, which involves holding a button when your meter is full and keeping it depressed while it drains and resets. It's a real test of nerve with traffic heading in both directions: you can afford to rear-end smaller vehicles, though collisions with anything larger will prematurely end your run.

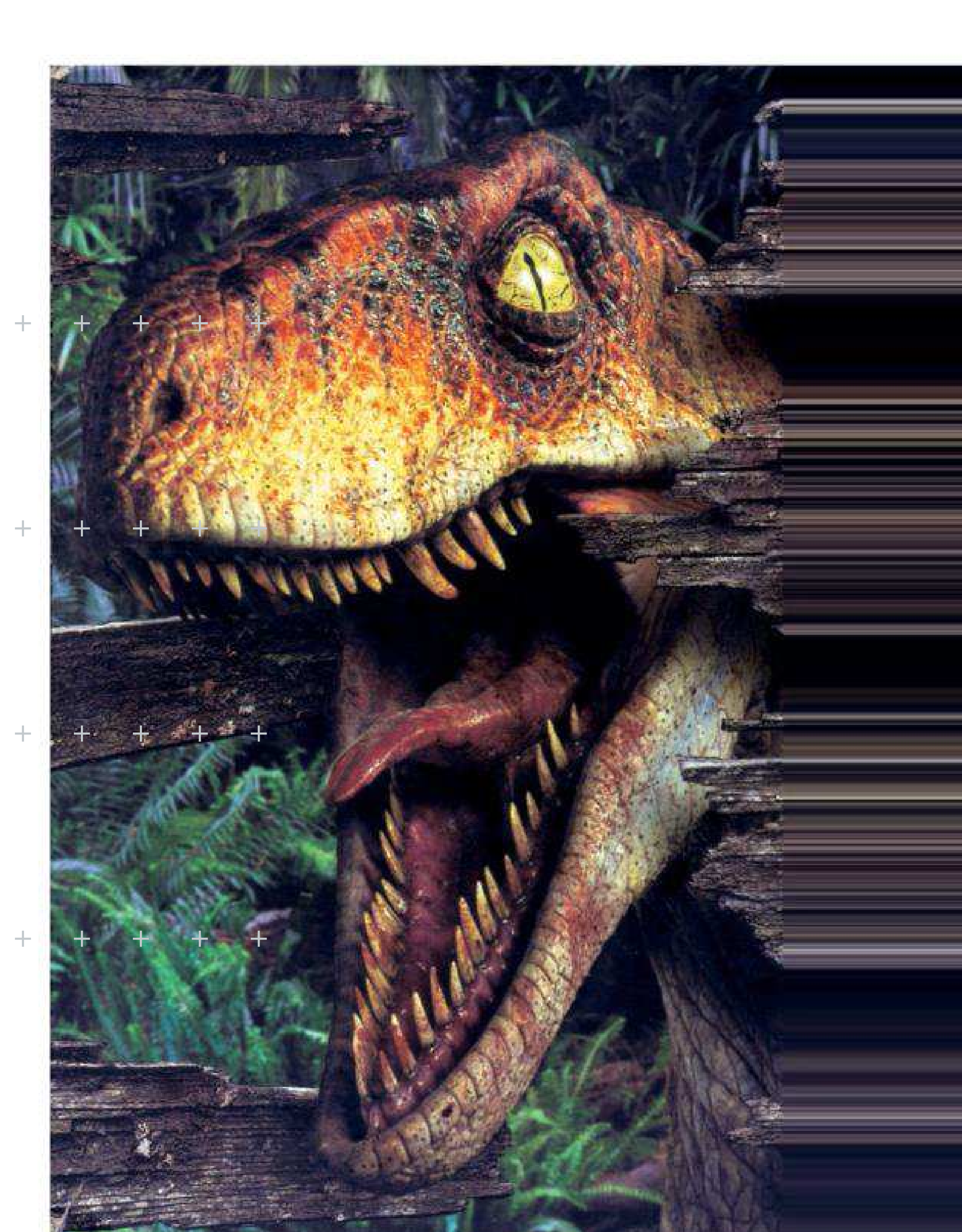


Tokens and bonus objectives have a much bigger impact on your score than the number of collisions you cause. Luck plays a major role in determining just how high you'll climb on the online leaderboards



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Jurassic Park: Trespasser

Excavating the site of one of gaming's most infamous failed experiments

By Phil Iwaniuk

Developer Dreamworks Interactive **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** PC **Release** 1998

They didn't know it at the time, but when two former Looking Glass employees Seamus Blackley and Austin Grossman decided to create a game about InGen Corporation's disastrous dinosaur endeavours to tie in with an upcoming Jurassic Park sequel, they set forth an irony that would echo through the ages. *Jurassic Park: Trespasser* is, perhaps harshly, remembered as one of PC gaming's great failed experiments, like its subject matter a wildly ambitious project that ultimately ended in catastrophe and saw much of its innovations abandoned. If Sir Dickie Attenborough's voice wasn't so synonymous with John Parker Hammond, you could almost believe that the sombre diary entries he reads throughout the game come from the developers themselves, rather than the InGen chief: "My work… my work lies where I left it. If there is anyone brave enough and clever enough to take it and… return the keys to time. Perhaps the foundation of a new empire."

Certainly, like Hammond, Dreamworks Interactive spared no expense. The mandate of *Trespasser* was to deliver an emergent firstperson experience within the Jurassic Park licence with no level-loading times, simulated solid-body physics, convincing dinosaur behaviour, and go a step beyond the key-hunting, floating-gun drudgery of *Quake*, as its developers saw it. While the product that shipped could never be accused of leaning on Id Software's safe template, it also fell short of its original vision and exceeded its budget several times on the way to an autumn 1998 release, one year later than intended. It was a big-budget project with considerable expectation, and it was the weight of that expectation which left *Trespasser* no room for error, and no willingness from critics or players to look past the shortcomings and enjoy the curiosity of exploring a near-miss milestone moment for firstperson gaming.

Time has softened attitudes to it. Blackley and Grossman coaxed more Looking Glass staff to their team after securing the Jurassic Park licence and Electronic Arts' publishing support, and there's a sense of the same pioneering spirit that gave players *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock* in the tropical exteriors of *Trespasser*. Rarely does the design muscle in and try to force the player through a conveyor belt of experiences, which must have been the most immediate temptation when making a Jurassic Park game. Instead its developers placed their faith in the interplay between their ambitious systems to autonomously 'design' the player's adventures. There are only a handful of dinosaur types on Isla Sorna, but within their AI programming are several emotional states triggered by their proximity to other dinosaurs and the player. The governing idea is that their placement alone is enough to put protagonist Anne through the full gamut of combat and evasion scenarios, at times depending on realtime physics to manipulate the world to her advantage, and frequently acting as an intimidator more than a hunter, firing off a weapon to scare velociraptors away rather than kill them outright.

It's possible to enjoy this different take on firstperson action gaming, even if all the dots don't join up. This is a game with far more walking and talking than gunplay or puzzle sequences, to the extent that it's even reminiscent of modern-day walking sims in certain passages. Anne (voiced sensitively by Minnie Driver) was only counting on a holiday to sunnier climes when she boarded the plane, as we learn in an opening FMV that, like much of *Trespasser*'s writing, seems to be visiting from a different, better game. When the plane goes down off Costa Rica, Anne's eventually washed up on a small island whose white beaches and tall palms give it the look of a fine makeshift holiday destination in itself. That's until she sees the InGen logos on derelict buildings and a half-finished monorail, and realises she's at the infamous 'Site B' they've been writing so much about in the papers. A breeding ground for the dinosaurs that were once intended to be shipped out to Jurassic Park. Fifteen minutes of island exploration and firstperson narrative in, and not a scale nor claw has been sighted. It's a striking departure from conventional '90s shooters.

As with much of the game, that thoughtful and action-light style came about by accident, the result of last-minute ▶

revisions and gutting sizeable chunks of game that weren't working. Although realtime physics were always intended to be a lynchpin of the way players experienced and made their way through the world, the game designers at Dreamworks Interactive quickly found that in order to implement stacking and toppling sequences intended to colour *Trespasser's* puzzles, a much deeper and more detailed physical simulation was required. Legend has it that at one time the desks of this department were strewn with building blocks and other objects, used to plan out object behaviour. Before release, Dreamworks decided it was simply too difficult for the player to build stairways and bridges using crates and barrels to progress through Isla Sorna, and all but a handful of these puzzles were axed in order to meet the release date. In their place, as far as the player can tell when they're at ground level, is simply more walking.

The physical geography of the island itself was hand-drawn by an environmental artist using the topography of one of Costa Rica's neighbouring islands. The idea was that the level-design team would approach the island as InGen would have, forging a path through the undergrowth and bulldozing hills where facilities would sit. Only after having painstakingly created the island in 3D Studio Max did the team realise that the end product wasn't particularly conducive to good level design. All traversal and visibility barriers had to be handmade after the fact, and the man-made quality of their mathematically perfect gradients makes them hard to miss at ground level.

Despite this and multitudinous other design shortcomings, there's something about Isla Sorna. Something that immediately transmits a sense of place so strong you can easily pick up on its nuances: the human tragedy of dinosaurs killing and eating the scientists who created them, expressed with little more than hard hats scattered round a deserted construction site. The majesty of the remaining inhabitants as they plod, 80 feet tall, through the forest. The sheer *menace* of the place, whether velociraptors and Tyrannosaurs are on-screen or lingering in the folds of your anxiety.

The effect of *Trespasser's* dino-on-dino setpieces is more Keystone Cops than Spielbergian spectacle up close, but the sight of a Tyrannosaur on the horizon still prompts a light sweat

NONE OF THE MECHANICAL ROUGH EDGES ARE ENOUGH TO NEGATE TRESPASSER'S CHARM AND CURIOSITY

Anne's extreme vulnerability in the situation she's faced with, along with the atmosphere, are the only things *Trespasser* can claim to really nail. Every single encounter with a carnivorous dinosaur is a terrifying ordeal that's only ever survived by the skin of the teeth, and in part that's a happy accident of the game's bizarre and infamous control method. It's easy to take the floating-gun concept of shooter design for granted at this stage, but when *Trespasser* was in development there were those who saw it as a lazy design shortcut which drew the player out of the game world; a temporary Heath Robinson solution until physics and control sets caught up. It was this mindset that led Dreamworks to giving players full, joint-by-joint control of Anne's



The dedication to physical detail extends as far as rigor-mortis-induced corpse twitching, though perhaps that's a happy accident of *Trespasser's* clipping issues



DREAM WEAVERS

Commercially disastrous as it may have been, *Trespasser* didn't spell the end for Dreamworks Interactive – now EA DICE Los Angeles, it's produced many successful games. The studio began as a joint venture between Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks production company and Microsoft, releasing several Jurassic Park and Goosebumps-licensed titles that were destined to be forgotten, alongside commercially anonymous new IPs such as *Someone's In The Kitchen*. *Trespasser* was intended to be the studio's breakout hit, but they'd have to wait a year longer for *Medal Of Honor* to find its audience for that to happen. Spielberg was hands-on with *Medal Of Honor*, devising the idea after hearing about his son's experiences playing *GoldenEye* and extending his interest in the war from the recent Saving Private Ryan to a new, interactive project.



An ambitious aiming mechanic, never to be repeated until the advent of VR's second wave. It's easier when your arm, not your mouse, controls the one on the screen

right arm. Through that interaction method, a simple gunfight against one velociraptor would require that the player source a weapon and pick it up, then aim their arm holding the gun, and finally fire it, using the iron sight of the weapon itself rather than any crosshair overlay.

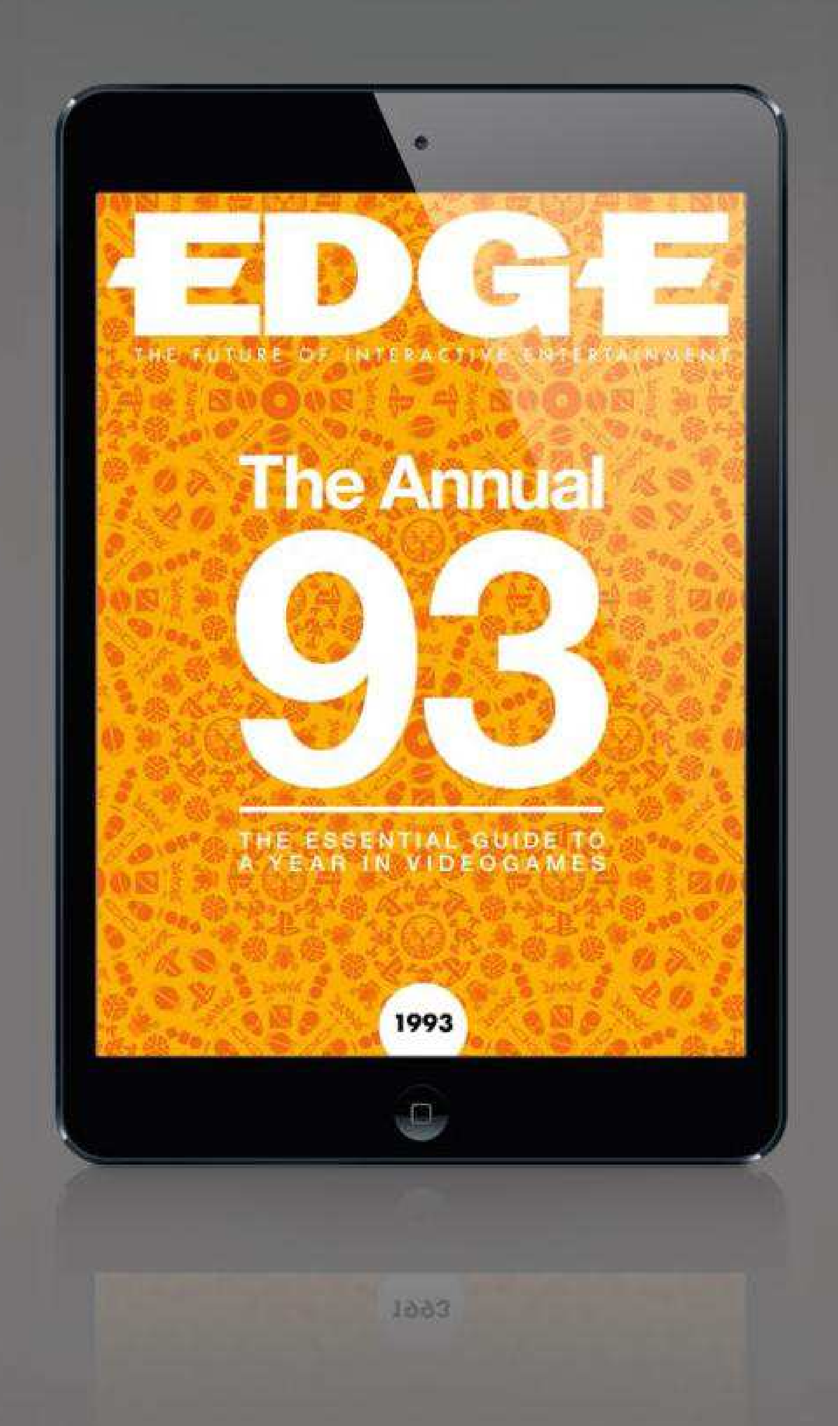
This involves waggling a slightly-too-long limb around in panicked swooshes, pushing it through the floor and inadvertently bending the wrist at nightmarish angles, before firing a shot harmlessly into the sky and being bitten to death. As Anne falls slowly towards her final resting place on the forest floor the camera settles on Anne's cleavage, her heart tattoo now depleted to reflect the player's health – another effort to do away with UI elements. What any player wouldn't give for a floating gun when the velociraptors come in packs towards *Trespasser*'s end.



There's nothing stopping the player from slaughtering herbivores indiscriminately. Nothing except their conscience, of course

None of these mechanical rough edges are enough to negate *Trespasser*'s charm and curiosity, and that fact is amply demonstrated by its community's efforts to remake the entire game in newer engines. With every playthrough, there's a tantalising glimpse of the game the developers wanted to make before their ambitions got the better of them. The skeletons of systems that later made *Half-Life 2* such a seminal release are visible. It perpetually threatens to produce the kind of emergent gameplay that would later characterise the *Far Cry* series, but those sophisticated AI interactions never really materialise.

Then and now, *Trespasser*'s name is incredibly fitting. Just as Anne found herself an unwelcome guest on Isla Sorna and prey to its inhabitants, the player, too, feels as though they're intruding on something private, perhaps still subject to experimentation and gestation. It's like stumbling on a leaked alpha build and trying to explore it without drawing detection. In 2018 a game like this would be saved by an iterative Early Access approach, eventually reaching its potential even if it missed a few deadlines. Having released in 1998, however, it's doomed to stay in development stasis forevermore, the player-made bridges and stairways its developers envisaged never to be constructed, and the potential of realtime physics in firstperson gaming now always to be credited to a *Half-Life* sequel which released six years later. ■









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A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Call Of Duty: WWII

Developer Sledgehammer Games **Publisher** Activision **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2017

Black Ops IIII's scavenger hunt approach to game design, cherry-picking elements from its peers, is not without *Call Of Duty* precedent. Last year's entry took a trip back to WWII, picking up elements from *Battlefield* (the grand scale of the new War mode) and *Destiny* (the social hub Headquarters, the pervasiveness of the loot-crate system) along the way.

The launch was executed with anything but military precision. For weeks after release, we found ourselves wandering the HQ area alone due to connectivity issues. But properly populated for several months, this has become more than a place to practise with weapons and scorestreaks. Loot-crates are regularly opened in front of other players – much to Activison's delight, no doubt. Another player can be challenged for a quick, tense, best-of-three, one-on-one deathmatch in the tiny purpose-built arena. HQ is also a place to deploy emotes to amusing effect; we'll never forget the time we saw the weirdly authentic sight of four players performing jumping jacks together.

War remains the standout element of the online experience, but the more traditional modes have been greatly improved by some significant post-launch updates. Silencers and incendiary shotgun shells for example, previously tied to the Airborne and Expeditionary divisions respectively, are now unlockable weapon attachments for all, opening up a wealth of new character build possibilities.

At launch, our highly trained soldier was incapable of running for more than a few seconds at a time before tiring; Sledgehammer Games has reversed this completely by granting an infinite, if slightly slower, sprint. Surprisingly enough, very few players take full advantage of this, meaning keeping up with the pace of matches is still relatively simple. If nothing else, it makes melee builds more viable.

And the most recent addition to the division lineup offers yet another tactical layer to dip into. Cavalry comes with a shield large enough to hide behind completely whilst crouching (though it leaves you extremely vulnerable from behind and to either side), and can level up to capture objectives faster than normal. The mobility and weapon-swap-speed disadvantages prevent this division from becoming overpowered, yet it remains a popular choice.

Sledgehammer has also become more comfortable with celebrating the less serious side of the series. At time of writing, Gun Game (replicable in any game mode via the new Wanderlust basic training) and Infected are trial reintroductions that have stuck and, alongside Prop Hunt, offer welcome distraction from the likes of Team Deathmatch and Domination for those who desire it. A magpie it may be, but *Call Of Duty: WWII* has proved that there's no shame in standing on the shoulders of giants if it's done properly. Your move, *Black Ops IIII*. ■

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